"THROUGH STAR-SPANGLED EYES":

LEW PULLER'S *FORTUNATE SON*

AND THE MYTH OF RESOLUTION

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Abstract:
My research explores the problems of resolution in Lewis B. Puller Jr.'s *Fortunate Son* and suggests that this literary device in war-trauma narratives is often a fictionalized, misrepresentation of the realities of combat-injury and post-war readjustment, a lingering relic of traditional heroic mythology. Resolutions are social constructions that obscure the experiences and distort the realities of war trauma. *Fortunate Son* is a system of constructed resolutions, throughout which Puller's quest toward rehabilitation and the process of readjustment become frequently interrupted by the return of the chaos narrative. This series of artificial resolutions results from the irreparable damage and the inability to heal completely from wounds of war as well as the ways in which the trauma reoccurs throughout his post-war life. Lew Puller's extreme physical injury was the catalyst for the traumas that occurred and reoccurred throughout his life, the same precursor event that led to his death decades later.

Lew Puller leaves behind a footprint of the repetition of his trauma in his autobiography. The trauma narrative appears as a cycle of improvement and decline. The physical, social, psychological, and ideological narratives discussed in this essay represent different forms of the traumas he experienced during his post-war readjustment. The traumas are told as narrative forms in the autobiography, and my analysis of the structures imposed on the trauma-narrative reveals the problems that remain unresolved after the end of the book. Veteran reintegration and recovery stories are cultural quest narratives rooted in the instability of chaos. The trauma of war threatens the upward trajectory of the veteran reintegration narratives. Throughout *Fortunate Son*, patterns of movement toward resolution and recovery are followed immediately by relapse, creating a perpetual process of failures and readjustments. This tension between Puller's desire to overcome the effects of war and his inability to recover from his traumas reveal the lasting effects of war-injury and illustrate underlying problems that have led to a systemic crisis of readjustment problems that American veterans still face today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Stories can save us," Tim O'Brien claims.[1] The debate on the therapeutic properties of trauma-writing continues, but what can we learn about trauma from the life-writing of a Vietnam veteran who committed suicide? In the decades following the conflict, veterans of the American War in Vietnam produced a large number of personal accounts of trauma. Some of the non-fiction works, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), and Lewis B. Puller Jr.'s *Fortunate Son* (1991) challenge the cultural norms and ideologies of the Cold War era, such as American exceptionalism and the myth of American moral infallibility. These authors often question governmental policies, such as containment, that led to U.S. intervention in international conflicts and endangered American lives. These memoirs confront the hardships of combat without the attempt to valorize injury or death; the above-mentioned combat veteran writers question the value of personal losses in a war they consider unjust. The Vietnam War era memoirs are individual responses to the trauma of war.

[1] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton, 1990), 213.

Some authors constructed these narratives as ways to cope with their war-experiences, overcome the aftermath, communicate their memories of the war, and resolve the lasting effects of trauma. The writers rely on tropes, clichés, narrative structures and archetypes that sometimes misconstrue the realities of war and the problems of readjustment. Before laying out my major argument and applying it to Lew Puller's autobiography, *Fortunate Son*, I will situate his work among other examples of war literature, discuss similar features of selected Vietnam War era memoirs, and provide an overview of the plot structures to be analyzed in Puller's text.

The literature of the Vietnam War era appears at first to be a distinct genre of veteran life-writing, a product of the historical period and as unique as the conditions of combat in Vietnam. World War II veteran and professor of literature, Samuel Hynes argues that the Vietnam War "lingers in American minds like the memory of an illness, a kind of fever that weakened the country until its people were divided and its cause was lost. That fever is in the narratives Americans have written about the war and it makes their soldiers' tale different from the tales of other modern wars—not simply because the United States lost, though that had not happened before, but because in the loss there was humiliation and bitterness and the burden of complicity in a nation's moral failure."[2] For all Hynes's unique insights into war and valuable contributions to the study of war narratives, he generalizes about the nature of "the soldiers' tale," as though there were some idealized soldier or one collective veteran narrative archetype. Hynes confronts the myths of war, what he describes as not "fabrication or fiction," but instead "the simplified

[2] Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 177.

narrative that evolves from war, through which it is given meaning: a Good War, a Bad War, a Necessary War."[3] However, by his using the plural *Soldiers* and the singular *Tale*, Hynes imagines a "whole coherent story" and thus a "simplified narrative," one that if understood as linear, could reveal a universal truth about war and the experience of combat. He concedes that "[s]uch an entire tale can never exist" but argues that a "notional tale" can reveal "what stories tell us (and don't tell us) about war.[4]

Closer examination of works by Vietnam War veterans reveals an extended conversation with other generations of war-writers; some allude to authors from the Great War who also underwent a traumatic ideological shock after experiencing the cruelties of combat and futility of death in a prolonged stalemate. The Vietnam War writers revisit the ideas of World War I poets, who became critical of militarism and the political and ideological discourses that romanticized and propagated war. In these Vietnam War memoirs, writers attempt to comprehend the so-called universal truths of war but in the context of the ideological shifts away from the Cold War perception of the United States Military as a global force of good in the world.

O'Brien explains how his views are shaped by his own personal experiences and informed by the traditions of war-writers from the Great War: "it would be fine to confirm the old beliefs about war: It's horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you. But still, none of this seems right." O'Brien rejects these romanticized sentiments of war outright before telling his war story. O'Brien reflects; "Now, the war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps

[3] Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, xiii.

[4] *Ibid.*

of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry. . . . Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme?" (23). O'Brien's ambivalence toward his experiences creates an anti-resolution. The questions for readers interested in veteran narratives: what can we learn about trauma from the ways survivors construct their war stories and what about the War in Vietnam contributes to the problems of resolution among the lives and stories of its survivors?[5]

The texts of O'Brien, Caputo, Kovic, and Puller are intimately personal accounts of psychological and physical trauma as well as quests for ideological rebirth. These writers suggest that their participation in the war was the inevitable result of their Cold War childhoods. In their introductory chapters (the exposition), they set up a familiar trope of innocence lost. These veterans discuss being seduced by the adventure of war and the need to fulfill the legacy of military service. Caputo explains, "the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure."[6] The narratives that emerged after the war challenge the "authority of the father and his military model," Tracy Karner asserts.[7] The protagonist figure enters the military, often expecting a heroic adventure, a

[5] So far this essay has suggested that the Vietnam writers carry on in the tradition of Great War writers in their rejection of the valor of death in war, but the rejection of the heroic warrior's death can be found, if momentarily, in Homer's *The Odyssey* as well. In book XI, when Odysseus travels to Hades to consult Teiresias upon his journey home from war, he meets the ghost of Achilles. In the scene, Homer depicts a grieving and regretful Achilles; he is no longer the personification of war that he appears to be in *The Iliad*. The dead hero reveals a truth in dying the hero's death that he could not understand in life: "'O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land allotted to him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead." *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper, 1965), xi lines 488-91.

[6] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine, 1977), 6.

[7] Tracy Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *American Studies* 37, no.1 (1996): 63. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642783

test of his manhood, and a hero's welcome—a rite of passage similar to the "Good War" myth of the Second World War.[8] "That did not happen," Samuel Hynes argues, because "the war had an anti-war myth of national dishonor. A Bad War after a Good War: it was like a fall from grace."[9] Tim O'Brien makes this generational divide apparent in his memoir. In the exposition, he discusses his Cold War childhood and the influences of growing up hearing war stories of the "great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s."[10]

These national and cultural themes appear throughout the personal accounts of veterans as betrayal and irony, when the protagonists discover that the realities of war are different from how they had been represented to them in the Cold War era. John Hellman explains, "[u]nderlying [these] separate works is a common allegory, an ironic antimyth in which an archetypal warrior representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revelation."[11] The protagonist abandons his patriotic convictions in his fight for daily survival. The Vietnam writers share a common connection to writers of the First World War involving the ways in which both generations construct their stories as collective experiences and narratives that are necessarily ironic. Paul Fussell's comments on *Catch-22* can readily be applied to the Vietnam War memoirs:

> This "primal scene" works because it is undeniably horrible, but its irony, its dynamics of hope abridged, is what makes it haunt the memory. It embodies the contemporary equivalent of experience offered by that first

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[9] Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 178.

[10] O'Brien, *Combat Zone,* 11.

[11] John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia U P, 1986), 102. As I will return to discuss later, Hellman's terms, chaos and quest, have poignant and insightful relevance to this paper, as I contextualize Vietnam narratives with Arthur Frank's work on chaos and quest narratives.

> day on the Somme, and like that archetypal original, it can stand as a virtual allegory of political and social cognition in our time. I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.[12]

However, World War II was the dominant archetypal narrative of war, the fathers' stories, that influenced most profoundly the ways cold warriors thought about the experience of war. Philip Caputo articulates, "we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. . . . We learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal."[13] The Vietnam veterans endured the hardships of war but were denied the idealized experience of war that they believed was a special rite of passage into manhood. Cold warriors had been socialized to believe that war—though would test their strength, bravery, and masculinity—would be an experience that shaped them into men, revered by their countrymen and afforded a special status as patriots. The Vietnam generation mistakenly thought war would form their identities not destroy them. Because the preconceptions differed so vastly from the realities of warfare, Vietnam veterans describe feeling betrayed by their government, communities, and fathers. The writings of these combat veterans contextualize their personal struggles within national, political, and ideological shifts. Many Vietnam War writers reject the WWII ideals of the nobility and necessity of sacrifice; instead, they emphasize modern warfare's destructiveness to the body and the devastation of trauma.

[12] Paul Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 35.

[13] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xv.

Some of these writers adapt a dramatic narrative structure, illustrated by Freytag's pyramid, generally involving the following sequence[14]: exposition (childhood and teenage years); rising action (boot camp, *baptism of fire*); climax (major battle, atrocity, wounding); falling action (in which the protagonist begins to confront his moral convictions and preconceived notions of war, patriotism, and honor, or questions his involvement or actions); and resolution. Autobiographers often impose resolutions upon their own life-stories. This essay asserts that resolution is not simply a literary device but also a social construction that distorts the realism of trauma narratives. Resolution seems a significant problem in the application of dramatic narrative structure to combat memoirs or veteran autobiographies because the idea of resolution denies the long-term, and sometimes permanent, effects of war. As historian John M. Kinder argues, "war is not a temporary phenomenon, something that can easily be left behind; rather, its human legacies are felt for decades, if not entire lifetimes."[15] These artificial resolutions reveal the influences of cultural war myths on veterans and result from the soldiers' attempts to reconcile their preconceptions of war with their actual experiences.

The majority of veteran autobiographers discussed in this essay all received formal training in writing and traditional education in literature or the arts. Homeric epics may have influenced the ways in which these writers reconstruct their own war experiences. The oldest archetypal narrative of the warrior's homecoming and the trials

[14] Often, the narrative sequence, however, does not follow a traditional chronological organization. For example, the structural organization of Kovic's *Born on the Fourth July* is cyclical. The structure does not follow a chronology as Puller's does. Nevertheless, the chapters do contain the critical elements of traditional dramatic narrative structure, even if not in a predictable sequence.

[15] John M. Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 11.

of reintegration, *The Odyssey*, has influenced western culture and the ways we understand the lasting repercussions of war. More important to the concerns of this essay, however, is the literary device *deus ex machina*, the divine intervention of Athena, which the poet employed to resolve the crises of Odysseus upon his arrival in Ithaca, implying that only the gods could resolve the lasting damages of war. Homer's use of this literary device suggests an ancient acknowledgement of the artificiality of resolution in reintegration narratives. This technique appears similar to the artificial resolutions employed by Lew Puller throughout his reintegration and rehabilitation process.

Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D. discusses the relationship between the Vietnam War experience and the works of Homer. Shay's first work, *Achilles in Vietnam*, challenges readers to understand the conditions under which men experience debilitating combat trauma and argues that the tragedy of Achilles in *The Illiad* reveals a universality to the experience of war and insight of the human condition of suffering caused by war.[16] Whereas, *Achilles in Vietnam* emphasizes the traumas undergone during combat, including PTSD, and what Shay calls the "undoing of character," his successor, *Odysseus in America*, recognizes Homer's *The Odyssey* as an allegory of the veterans' homecoming and reintegration experience.[17] Shay does not, however, consider reasons for the intervention of Athena and her thwarting the blood vengeance of the suitors. Shay mentions these closing scenes but offers no explanation for the poet's need for divine intervention in order for the narrative to resolve.

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[16] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (Atheneum, NY: Maxwell, 1994).

[17] Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

Although this essay primarily examines the post-war life of Lewis B. Puller Jr. in his autobiography *Fortunate Son*, it will be necessary to discuss the structures of similar veteran life-writing from the Vietnam War era to establish commonalities. Tim O'Brien, perhaps the most acclaimed author of his generation, resists traditional structures of story-telling in his masterpiece, *The Things They Carried*.[18] O'Brien confronts the limitations of his own memory and his own experience of the war by blending fact and fiction, telling and retelling stories that contradict themselves in the text, imaginatively recreating a collective experience of the war, and producing what can be described only as autobiographical fiction, *i.e.* creative literature that is constructed but based from personal experience.[19] The trauma of war manifests and reoccurs throughout the war-stories of Tim O'Brien. The author reveals how he relives his traumas during the writing process: "I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field, or Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree, and as I write about these things, the remembering is

[18] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton, 1990).

[19]However, if *The Things They Carried* may be labeled autobiographical fiction, then his relatively less-explored memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, should be considered fictional autobiography, as there remains always an imaginative aspect of life-writing.

Paul John Eakin argues, "[I]t is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical." Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1985), 10.

Eakin claims, "Fiction in autobiography is a natural function of the autobiographical process." Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 17.

As Janis E. Haswell suggests, "O'Brien offers . . . not a report of the war, but a "rehappening" shaped by memory and imagination" (95). Janis E. Haswell, "The Craft of the Short-Story in Retelling the Viet Nam War: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *The South Carolina Review* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 94-109.

turned into a kind of rehappening. . . . The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over."[20]

Within the structure of war narratives are remnants of the "rehappenings" of trauma and because trauma reoccurs throughout a survivor's life, it resists resolution in life-writing. O'Brien's memoir avoids this literary device. Concluding with his departure from Vietnam and the anti-climactic return upon a commercial airplane, his work ends abruptly without resolution. O'Brien writes, "[w]hen the plane leaves the ground, you join everyone in a ritualistic shout, trying to squeeze whatever drama you can out of leaving Vietnam. But the effort makes the drama artificial. You try to manufacture your own drama."[21] O'Brien spent the majority of his literary career creating and recreating his war drama. In *The Things They Carried*, he recounts a time when his daughter asked if he had ever killed anyone: "'You keep writing these war stories,' she said, 'so I guess you must've killed someone.' . . . She was absolutely right," O'Brien reveals; "[t]his is why I keep writing war stories."[22] O'Brien implies that his *oeuvre* is the product of his inability to resolve the traumatic experience of Vietnam.

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien constructs a character, a friend named Erik, through whom O'Brien engages in dialogue with writers past, discusses the politics of war, and challenges social constructions of masculinity in the military (*e.g.* a drill instructor accuses them of a homosexual relationship). When the writer introduces Erik during the boot camp phase of his military experience, they strike up a conversation

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[20] O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 31.

[21] Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Broadway, 1975), 206.

[22] O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 125.

about literature. Erik lends Tim a copy of T.E. Lawrence's (Lawrence of Arabia) *The Mint,* an autobiographical work that depicts the military training process of the Royal Air Force during the First World War. O'Brien writes, "[w]ith *The Mint* I became a soldier. I succumbed. Without a backward glance at privacy, I gave into soldiering. I took on a friend, betraying in a sense my wonderful suffering."[23] In the memoir, this friendship serves as a vehicle through which O'Brien explores the philosophical notions of courage and honor, questions the ideological systems for which men go to war, and expresses his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Through the characters' dialogue, O'Brien pays homage to writers of the Great War and uses their literature to articulate his own observations on the nature of men at war. O'Brien creates intertextuality among his memoir, and the writings of Ezra Pound and Wilfred Owen. Through this character Erik, the author invokes the voices of Great War veteran writers. "Erik became Ezra Pound," O'Brien writes, as "he recited a portion of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly": "Died some, pro patria, non 'dulce' non 'et décor'"; Erik responds "[a]ll this not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather it's from society's censure, just as Pound claims. Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood. We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes."[24] Erik's character reappears near the end of his tour via letters as O'Brien questions the ideal of courage and confronts the possibility of dying in vain. In this chapter titled "*Dulce et Decorum"* his memoir responds to the ideas of Wilfred Owen: "It seemed odd. We weren't the old soldiers of World War II. No valor to

[23] O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* 34-35.

[24] O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* 38.

squander for things like country or honor or military objectives. All the courage in August was the kind you dredge up when you awaken in the morning knowing it will be a bad day. Horace's old do-or-die aphorism—'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'—was just an epitaph for the insane."[25]

Tim O'Brien warns readers to be cautious of literature that justifies the losses of war and advises us to be skeptical when a narrative of trauma is resolved at the end. In the chapter of *The Things They Carried* entitled, "How to Tell a True War Story," he opines that a "true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story, you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie."[26] O'Brien's comment on "rectitude" being part of the old lie suggests that the resolution of trauma narratives reinforces the ideological state apparatus that tells young men that to die for country is the highest honor. Resolution in the stories of war survivors promotes the idealized myths and gender constructions that tell us that trauma can be overcome through determination and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.

Philip Caputo provides insight into the structure of war narratives as he discusses the art of telling a "true" war story in a short autobiographical piece, "The Red Write of Courage." He argues that telling a true war story "requires a minimalist approach to character and plot because modern war destroys or at least blurs human character, and it

[25] O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* 175.

[26] O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 65.

does not conform to archetypal cinematic narrative, with its setup, its three acts divided by 'plot points' and its final resolution."[27] With these problems in mind, he wondered if the best way to capture and retell his Vietnam experience was fiction or documentary. "Most of the enduring literature of war," Caputo writes, "from the *Iliad* through *The Thin Red Line*, was fictional. The imagination seemed to shed a brighter light into the truth of war . . . than a slavish adherence to facts."[28] He explains what he means by "truth of war" by quoting William Tecumseh Sherman, "'War is cruelty. You cannot refine it.'"[29] Caputo decided that the best way to convey his war experience to readers was to use "novelistic techniques, the idea being to show rather than tell the reader what it was like to fight in Vietnam."[30] For these reasons, Caputo reveals that he wrote *A Rumor of War* as a journalistic memoir instead of a novel as he initially intended.

His memoir resists the archetypal narrative structure just described. With the final moments of his tour of duty, *A Rumor of War* concludes anti-climactically: "The plane banked and headed out . . . toward freedom from death's embrace. None of us was a hero. We would not return to cheering crowds, parades . . . . We had done nothing more than endure. We had survived, and that was our only victory."[31] Caputo describes the end of his deployment with an impression of uncertainty, an appropriate rhetorical move that recreates the anxieties of a generation of combat veterans returning from Vietnam—an

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[27] Philip Caputo, "The Red Write of Courage," *The Journal of the Writer's Guild of America* 7, no. 7 (2003): 43.

[28] Caputo, "The Red Write of Courage," 39.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Caputo, "The Red Write of Courage," 40.

[31] *Ibid.,* 320.

anti-resolution. Ten years after his tour of duty, Caputo returned as a correspondent. The epilogue briefly recounts his hasty evacuation from Saigon during its fall: "'The end of an era.' I suppose it was, but I was too tired to reflect on the historical significance of the event in which I had just taken part: America had lost its first war." Caputo's words seem to voice the reactions of his amnesiac and "war-weary" countrymen in 1975: "We took the news quietly. It was over."[32]

A Rumor of War depicts the graphic realities of war and explores the relationships of men at war, bonds forged in intense struggles for daily survival. Addressing the "ambivalent realities" of the war, Caputo discusses the "compelling attractiveness of combat" but simultaneously abhors the "absolute savagery" of violence.[33] During his first months in country in 1965, Caputo confronts his own preconceptions of war and the "missionary idealism" with which he answered Kennedy's famous call to arms as a middle-class American bred in the customary naiveté of a generation of cold warriors. Similar to Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo frames his own feelings of disillusionment with frequent allusions to previous generations of war-writers who reject the romanticism of war, including Wilfred Owen whom he quotes at the beginning of the first chapter. Caputo's text memorializes the casualties of the war and testifies to the futility of those deaths. He writes, "this book ought not be regarded as a protest. . . . Besides, it no longer seems necessary . . . because the war is over. We lost it, and no amount of objecting will resurrect the men who died . . . . It might perhaps prevent the next generation from being

[32] Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 328.

[33] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xvi-xvii.

crucified in the next war. But I don't think so."[34] This final line of the prologue emphasizes a cynical belief that no profound lessons about war may be learned from reading a story. These reflections parallel O'Brien's when he asks this question: "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories."[35]

War correspondent, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and the New Journalism with which he reports on the American War in Vietnam relies more on cinematic narrative structure rather than novelistic techniques. Maggie Gordon argues convincingly that Herr employs "film as the basic paradigm of structure" in *Dispatches*, its "genre as Classic Hollywood Narrative," and John Wayne war movies as its closest archetype.[36] Michael Herr subverts the traditional plot structure in the introduction, "Breathing In" when he immediately immerses the reader into Vietnam instead of an exposition that builds up toward the conflict. Rather than providing background information of characters, he gives an overview of the Vietnam experience, such as conditions in the field and the "death from above" postmodern warfare tactics of helicopter assault and air mobility. Herr depicts the war as a cultural experience that merged into chaos: "all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy."[37] The author contextualizes his journalistic account within Cold War ideology and then contradicts it. He facetiously writes, "Hearts and Minds, Peoples of the

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[34] *Ibid.*, xxi.

[35] Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat* Zone, 23.

[36] Maggie Gordon, "Appropriation of Generic Convention: Film as Paradigm in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 28 no. 1 (2000): 17-18.

[37] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage, 1991): 20.

Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching Doodah; you could also hear the other, some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying 'All that's just a *load*, man. We're here to kill gooks. Period.' Which wasn't true at all true of me. I was there to watch."[38] As evident in the passage above and the introductions of O'Brien's memoir and Caputo's prologue, ambivalence and irony appear throughout these narratives frequently enough to suggest a common theme in Vietnam War literature.

Anti-resolution marks the introduction of *Dispatches* when the author illustrates the problems of reintegration of a Green Beret who experienced psychological trauma when his unit was ambushed and only he survived by hiding beneath the corpses of friends. "'I just can't hack it back in the World,'" the veteran admitted and confessed to Herr that "after he'd come back home the last time he would sit in his room all day, and sometimes he'd stick a hunting rifle out the window, leading people and cars as they passed his house."[39] Unlike other writers of the war, Herr confronts post-war reintegration matters in the introduction, writing about the lasting effects of trauma from the start of the story and contradicting the conventions of expositions in war narratives.

The conclusion of *Dispatches* mirrors its introduction and reaffirms readjustment problems after combat and the resistance to resolution in war stories. Herr's "colleague" writes, "[b]ack in the World now, and a lot of us aren't making it. The story got old or we got old, a great deal more than the story had taken us there anyway, and many things had been satisfied. Or so it seemed . . . . We came to fear something more complicated than

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] Herr, *Dispatches*, 5.

death, an annihilation less final but more complete, and we got out. . . . We got out and became like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and . . . incomplete."[40] Herr emphasizes the ways that trauma transforms its survivors and the damage of these irreconcilable changes. Similar to O'Brien and Caputo, Herr ends the book anticlimactically: "it didn't end like any war story I'd ever imagined. . . . The war ended, and then it really ended. . . . And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there."[41] This passage reflects and reiterates the nature of trauma narrative—the repetition of the experience. The war story does not resolve, it repeats, circles the wound, and folds back upon itself.[42]

Along with the evidence of personal trauma, these narratives contain traces of national ideological shock. Part of the problem of resolution involves unreconciled social issues in the United States in the aftermath of the conflict, including how veterans felt betrayed both by the government and the public. The writings of O'Brien, Caputo, and Herr conclude without resolution. The authors make no attempt to suggest that their problems (or the problems of other survivors) ended with their tour of duty, instead just the opposite. The closing chapters suggest that the problems are really just beginning—the problems of adjustment from war to peace. This feature of war literature is what I call anti-resolution—the conclusion of a war story without resolving the tensions or the

[40] Herr, *Dispatches*, 243-44.

[41] Herr, *Dispatches*, 259-60.

[42] It's worth noting that Herr's works, *Dispatches* and his contribution to *Apocalypse Now* have influenced significantly the way we think of the Vietnam War experience. The differences in structure between Puller's and Herr's as well as O'Brien and Kovic, may have discouraged literary critics from focusing much attention on *Fortunate Son* because structurally, it is markedly different from the narratives most of us associate with the Vietnam War and post-modernism.

problems experienced by the trauma survivor. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* and Lew Puller's *Fortunate Son* conclude radically different from *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *A Rumor War* because of the extent of their injuries. Kovic's and Puller's are readjustment narratives in which the writers cope with the difficulties of severe physical disability, paraplegia from the chest down in the former, and amputation of both legs at the hip in the latter.

The structure of *Born on the Fourth of July* appears cyclical, a narrative that does not resolve at the end, but instead revolves, circling the wound. As O'Brien's and Caputo's memoirs conclude upon the end of their combat tour, Kovic's story begins with and ends with his wounding.[43] The first chapter opens in the moments after his injury; the memoir's conclusion details the circumstances leading up to and immediately after his wounding. "All I could feel" Kovic concludes, "was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing."[44] Shot in the foot and the shoulder, the marine suffered a traumatic spinal cord injury, and his memoir depicts the struggles of adjusting to his disability as well as the intellectual evolution that followed his experiences in Vietnam. After being injured, Kovic underwent an ideological shift to the left and became an influential anti-war protestor. *Born on the Fourth of July* is a story of reintegration, ideological rebirth, and political quest, with an elliptic narrative structure that centers around the trauma of the body.

Kovic's ideological narrative travels between a dichotomy of childhood innocence and traumatic experience, a common theme in the Vietnam War canon. The

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[44] Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 222.

author revisits his childhood twice in the memoir, both times immediately after depicting physical trauma: once at the beginning and once at the end. The final page returns nostalgically to his backyard, a space where he could play baseball and Mickey Mantle was still his hero; he could hula-hoop and experience young love; he "could live forever."[45] Kovic grew up in middle-class suburbia, sheltered in the privileges and comforts of post-war America. The baby-boomer recollects fond memories from his childhood of playing baseball—and war—and idolizing his childhood heroes: Mickey Mantle, Audie Murphy, and John Wayne. Kovic volunteered for the Marine Corps in 1964. In his new introduction to his 2005 edition, he writes, "we cross certain thresholds where there is no going back, no return to the innocence we once knew; the change is utter and irreconcilable."[46] These reflections reinforce the observation that war inflicts a permanent change upon its survivors and the structure of his memoir emphasizes the importance of this transformation.

Kovic attempts to resolve the ideological conflict of the memoir near the end before the narrative structure returns to Vietnam. In this scene, Kovic recounts his experience at a 1972 Republican convention. He finally earns a moment in the spotlight and uses it to protest President Nixon's policy in Vietnam on live national television. Kovic recalls, "[t]his was the moment I had come three thousand miles for, this was it, all the pain and the rage, all the trials and the death of the war and what it had done to me and a generation of Americans . . . . It was all hitting me at once, all those years, all that

[45] Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 224.

[46] Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Akashic, 2005), 15.

destruction, all that sorrow."[47] The tension in Kovic's narrative builds toward this point. When he shouts and interrupts Nixon's speech, the Secret Service forcibly removes him. The crowd spits on him and calls him traitor. "So this is how they treat their wounded veterans!" he responds.[48] He ends the chapter in tears: "[w]e had done it. It had been the biggest moment of our lives, we had shouted down the president . . . . What more was there left to do but go home? I sat in my chair still shaking and began to cry."[49] Kovic's descriptions of this scene suggest closure or fulfillment; however, the chapter appears as anything but resolution. The scene describes a nation divided, conflict, "pandemonium"—an anti-resolution.[50]

These anti-resolutions seem representative of the Vietnam War experience because in the most popular narratives, writers attempt to cope with the trauma of war generally, as well as struggle with the ideological ruptures of the era. As veterans are trying to readjust from war, many must also reconcile their losses in an unpopular, and what many consider, unjust war. These veterans served in the first war the United States had ever lost, a long and painful withdrawal that ended anti-climactically; the morally ambiguous end to the collective trauma of the Vietnam War contributed to the inability of veterans to find resolution in the experiences and their stories reflect these crises.

My research explores the problems of resolution in Lewis B. Puller Jr.'s *Fortunate Son* and suggests that this literary device in war-trauma narratives is often a

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[47] Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 182-83.

[48] Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July,* 183.

[49] Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 184.

[50] Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 184.

fictionalized, misrepresentation of the realities of combat-injury and post-war readjustment, a lingering relic of traditional heroic mythology. Puller's Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography has received surprisingly little scholarly attention since its publication.[51] The autobiography portrays Puller's life, eclipsed by the shadow of his legendary father, Lewis "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated Marine in the history of the Corps. Lew Puller could never "reconcile [his] father's triumphal return from World War II with [his] own."[52] Comparing his own military experience to his father's propagandized service record, Puller struggles to accept his own physical limitations and doubts his masculinity throughout the text. Although Puller received a Silver Star for his conduct on the battle field, he believes that he failed to live up to his father's image and contemplates throwing his medals upon the steps of the Capitol. At the foreground of the text, Puller questions the worth of his bodily sacrifice, which included a quadruple amputation. His autobiography details his struggles to overcome the lasting effects of combat trauma. *Fortunate Son* challenges romanticized preconceptions of war and articulates the lasting post-war readjustment issues of the Vietnam generation. Puller's book bridges the gulf between his father's generation and his own, and his story provides a cross-sectional account of the problems of many combat veterans during the era and the years afterwards.

Fortunate Son is a system of constructed resolutions, throughout which Puller's quest toward rehabilitation and the process of readjustment become frequently interrupted

[51] One of the very few works that deals with *Fortunate Son* is Elizabeth Grubgeld's.
Elizabeth Grubgeld, "Refiguring the Masculine Body in the Autobiographies of Disabled Men," in *New Essays on Life Writing and the Body* eds. Christopher Stuart and Stephanie Todd (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 192-206.

[52] Lewis B. Puller, *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller* (New York: Grove, 1991), 234.

by the return of chaos. This series of artificial resolutions results from the irreparable damage and the inability to heal completely from wounds of war as well as the ways in which the trauma reoccurs throughout his post-war life. Lew Puller experiences and re-experiences his war traumas which manifest in numerous ways both psychologically and emotionally. Building on Freud's observations of trauma, Cathy Caruth suggests, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it . . . returns to haunt the survivor later on."[53] Caruth discusses the tendency of trauma to reoccur throughout some victims' lives, what she calls the "double wound" or "the repeated infliction of a wound," which can reoccur several times after the initial traumatic experience.[54] However, this study diverges from Caruth's suggestion that "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world, is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event."[55] Severe physical trauma often times is not "healable," and physical injury can precipitate psychological trauma, survivor's guilt, and moral injury. Lew Puller's extreme physical injury was the catalyst for the traumas that occurred and reoccurred throughout his life, the same precursor event that led to his death decades later. As Caruth explains, "the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event . . . but rather the endless *inherit necessity* of repetition, which ultimately may lead to destruction."[56] Lew Puller leaves behind a footprint of the repetition of his trauma in his autobiography. The

[53] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

[54] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

[55] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

[56] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 62-63.

trauma narrative appears as a cycle of improvement and decline. The persistence of these artificial resolutions results from what Caruth describes as "the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts" and "a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth" that the trauma survivor "cannot fully know."[57]

Throughout *Fortunate Son*, patterns of movement toward resolution and recovery are followed immediately by relapse, creating a perpetual process of failures and readjustments. This tension between Puller's desire to overcome the effects of war and his inability to recover from his traumas reveal the lasting effects of war-injury and illustrate underlying problems that have led to a systemic crisis of readjustment problems that American veterans still face today. Two years after winning the Pulitzer Prize and after decades of suffering from physical pain, depression, addiction, and a myriad of social and emotional afflictions, Lewis B. Puller committed suicide on May 11, 1994. As Elizabeth Grubgeld argues, "[t]he shadow of Puller's last months and his terrible death colors any reading of his autobiography, but within the text itself lies a fundamental tension between the upward movement toward a narrative of quest and rebirth, and the gravitational pull of the language of the body, which threatens to return the quest to the agony of chaos."[58] Lew Puller's suicide illustrates the problems that can occur after trauma-recovery stories end and the artificiality of resolution in his narrative. Puller's inability to recover from the physical and emotional wounds of war disrupts the narrative structures of heroic journeys and resists the idea that war-trauma can always be overcome.

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[57] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

[58] Grubgeld, "Refiguring the Masculine Body," 198.

Resolution is a commonly recognized literary plot device, in which the conflict ends and the protagonist rises to a higher social standing or better situation than the he or she began. I have adapted Gustav Freytag's dramatic structure, commonly referred to as Freytag's Pyramid, and applied some elements of his plot description to explicate Puller's narrative. To more accurately represent the trajectory of narrative structure in veteran reintegration stories, I have inverted Freytag's Pyramid. As a result of the inversion, the climax will be referred to as the nadir, which more appropriately labels the fulcrum point of the traumatic narrative. Also, as the graph below illustrates, at the point when the resolution is expected, Puller never reaches the level of quality of life at which he begins his narrative. The protagonist of stories written with a dramatic structure becomes transformed by the experiences and typically rises to a higher social position or level of wisdom as a result of the journey, similar to American heroic John Wayne-type adventures. My research will demonstrate that this feature is a concept of heroic mythologies, inapplicable to most veteran experiences.

Figure 1 illustrates the linear trajectory of Puller's narrative and distinguishes three sub-categories: the physical, the social, and the psychological narrative.[59] Another narrative will be discussed in Chapter 4, the Ideological Narrative. These four narratives of readjustment are representative of the complexity and the depths of Puller's traumas. The physical, social, psychological, and ideological problems represent different forms of the traumas he experienced during his post-war readjustment. The traumas are told as

[59] Although all three of these aspects of Puller's narrative are inextricably interwoven, for the purposes of analysis and organization, I will explicate each separately and according to the most relevant chapters.

narrative forms in the autobiography, and my analysis of the structures imposed on the traumas reveals the problems that remain unresolved after the end of the book.

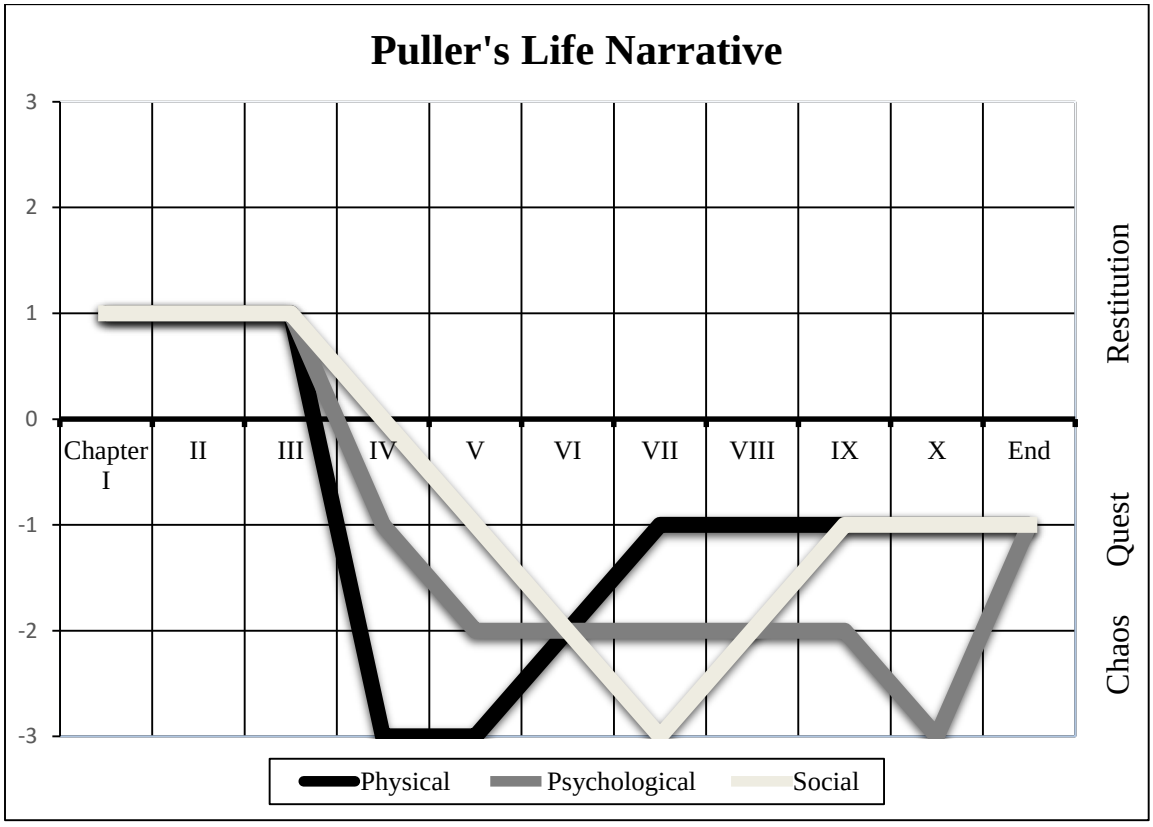

Figure 1: Overall Quality of Life: -3=extremely debilitating; +3=exceptionally high quality of life

The vertical axis of Figure 1 represents an overall quality of life scale. The numeric scale has been adapted from the World Health Organization's Quality of Life Assessment. [60] Although the scale is numeric for the purposes of evaluation and assessment, the scale should be considered relative to how Puller describes his quality of life as compared to

[60] The Overall quality scale was developed based on the World Health Organization's Quality of Life Assessment. The WHO's assessment is based on six domains: (a) physical domain; (b) psychological domain; (c) level of independence; (d) social relationships; (e) environment; and (f) spirituality/religion/personal beliefs. For the purposes of this research, the most relevant domains to Puller's narrative are physical, psychological, and social. For more specific information on the assessment of quality of life see the following:
WHOQOL group. "The World Health Organization quality of life assessment (WHOQOL): position paper from the World Health Organization." *Social science & medicine* 41, no. 10 (1995): 1403-1409. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/027795369500112K#

other moments in the text. Additionally, to show a qualitative assessment of quality of life, as represented in the right vertical axis, I have applied Arthur Frank's foundational study of illness narratives, *The Wounded Story Teller,* in which Frank defines four major types of illness narratives: restitution narrative, chaos narrative, quest narrative, and testimony.[61] For the purposes of this research, chaos and quest are most relevant to this analysis of Puller's life narrative, as Puller never reaches restitution.[62]

Restitution most closely resembles the literary device of resolution. Puller narrates his own individual experience, but as these artificial resolutions illustrate, he assimilates elements of dramatic narrative structure into his non-fiction to facilitate the writing process. Frank explains, "[p]eople tell their own unique stories, but they compose these stories by adapting and combining narrative types that cultures make available."[63] Frank claims "[t]he plot of restitution has the basic storyline: 'Yesterday I was healthy [*sic*] today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again."[64] Thus, restitution creates an improbability for victims of trauma and amputated survivors of war because disabled veterans readjust to the physical limitations of their bodies but never return to a pre-trauma state of "'as good as new,'" as Frank describes it.[65] Similarly, trauma victims may

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[61] Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

[62] As Frank notes, "[t]hough both restitution and chaos remain background voices when the quest is foreground, the quest narrative speaks from the ill person's perspective and holds the chaos at bay" (115). However, as my research will demonstrate the chaos narrative remains in the background. As Puller attempts to recover from his Vietnam experience, the autobiography remains overwhelmingly a narrative of chaos throughout most of the post-war sections of the text. And although Puller concludes his autobiography at a moment of restitution, as my research will argue, it is only an artificial resolution, which never truly overcomes the chaos, but rather momentarily "holds the chaos at bay."

[63] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 75.

[64] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 77.

[65] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 77.

eventually learn to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but many never fully recover. For some veterans, restitution becomes a myth. Readjustment problems stem from the inability to return to the *status quo ante*; trauma changes survivors permanently and their narratives reflect these transformations.

The chaos narrative may reveal a significant truth about why some narratives of war resist resolution. "Chaos is the opposite of restitution," writes Arthur Frank; "its plot imagines life never getting better."[66] Frank describes the chaos narrative as an "*anti-narrative* of time without sequence, telling without mediation, and speaking about oneself without being fully able to reflect on oneself."[67] In an interdisciplinary study of combat trauma in war narratives, John Talbott argues that soldiers' stories and their reenactments of trauma appear "less a story than a fragment of a story, representing a larger and longer disaster, but without beginning, middle, or end and without meaning, resolution, or point."[68] War narratives lack resolution because in the absence of narrative sequence in lived chaos, the trauma becomes the center around which the narrative begins to form. Since trauma is not a singular episode but rather the reoccurrence of wounding (as Caruth claims), and the narrative is a rehappening or reenactment of that trauma (as Talbott claims), then by its very nature, trauma narrative lacks resolution.

In the post-war sections of *Fortunate Son*, readers can identify the "voice of chaos." Chaos narratives are told retrospectively. Frank suggests that telling the chaos narrative requires some distance from the state of lived chaos. The chaos "story traces the

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[66] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 97.
[67] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 98.

[68] John Talbott, "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27, No. 3 (1997): 438. http://www.jstor.org/stable/205914

edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail," argues Frank.[69] Frank first began to discover the chaos narrative in his investigation of Holocaust narratives. He claims that chaos narratives are difficult to "hear because they are too threatening. The anxiety these stories provoke inhibits hearing."[70] Finally, "chaos stories are told on the edges of speech. Ultimately, chaos is told in the silences that speech cannot penetrate or illuminate. The chaos narrative is always beyond speech, and thus it is what is always *lacking* in speech. Chaos is what can never be told." Thus, the chaotic narrative appears so enigmatic and illusive that the hearer can never truly comprehend, and the narrator can never articulate or relate it to another. In the context of Vietnam, communicating trauma brought further complications: veterans were stigmatized and ostracized. Many Vietnam veterans chose not to speak their traumas for fear of the stigma attached to psychological injury.[71] Many veterans endured untreated and undiagnosed trauma, often self-medicating with alcohol and sometimes abusing drugs. Like many others, Lew Puller was unable to relate his experience to others, until much later in his life during the 1990s, after ten years of sobriety.

As this essay will demonstrate, Lew Puller's trauma remains unhealed and the chaos narrative in the background at the end of the autobiography. The chaos narrative

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[69] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 98.

[70] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 97-98.

[71] To further complicate reintegration, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not officially diagnosed until the DSM-III recognized it officially in 1980, and most veterans lacked the resources to seek private counseling. As a result of economic straits and lack of resources offered by the Veteran's Administration, many combat veterans suffered undiagnosed war-injuries when they needed assistance most, during the reintegration period.

exists just beyond the text because as Frank has said, it is incommunicable. Nonetheless, the chaos narrative appears more recognizable during Lew Puller's most vulnerable states during the following episodes: immediately after his wounding, during the death of his father, after his political defeat by landslide, his alcoholism, and his attempted suicide. Chaos forces the acknowledgment "that life sometimes *is* horrible. . . . This horror is a mystery that can only be faced, never solved," or *resolved*.[72] "In the chaos narrative," Frank claims, "troubles go all the way down to bottomless depths. What can be told only begins to suggest all that is wrong."[73]

[72] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 112.

[73] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 99.

CHAPTER II

THE PHYSICAL TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Puller's physical trauma narrative begins with his wounding. When his war experience ends in Vietnam, his battles with the experience of Vietnam begins. Puller hits a booby-trapped landmine constructed from a howitzer shell, and the lower half of his body instantaneously vaporizes into a "pink mist."[74] Puller recalls the moments after the explosion:

> As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I felt elated at the prospect of relinquishing my command and going home to my wife and unborn child. . . . I could not see the jagged shards of flesh and bone that had only moments before been my legs, and I did not realize until much later that I had been forever set apart from the rest of humanity. (157)

In the initial moments after the blast, Puller feels relieved to leave the Vietnam battlefield, but leaving his men in the field became a source of survivor's guilt later in life. This moment is the first of many false resolutions in the text. His tour of duty was over; he was going home to his wife and unborn child. He "did not understand" at that moment that his battles to overcome the Vietnam War had just really begun. His

[74] Puller, *Fortunate Son*, 157. All quotes from Puller's autobiography will be cited parenthetically hereafter.

retrospective comments reveal the emergent chaos narrative: the realization that he "had been forever set apart from the rest of humanity." In his reflections, we hear a faint, yet haunting, echo of the Holocaust survivor when Arthur Frank asked him to reflect on his liberation from a concentration camp: "'Then I knew my troubles were *really* about to begin.'"[75] The end of Chapter IV and most of Chapter V are the most chaotic sections of Puller's physical trauma narrative. Chapter V opens with his life or death struggle in the hospital back stateside. The nadir of his physical trauma narrative lies in the hospital scene, as seen in Figure 2.[76]

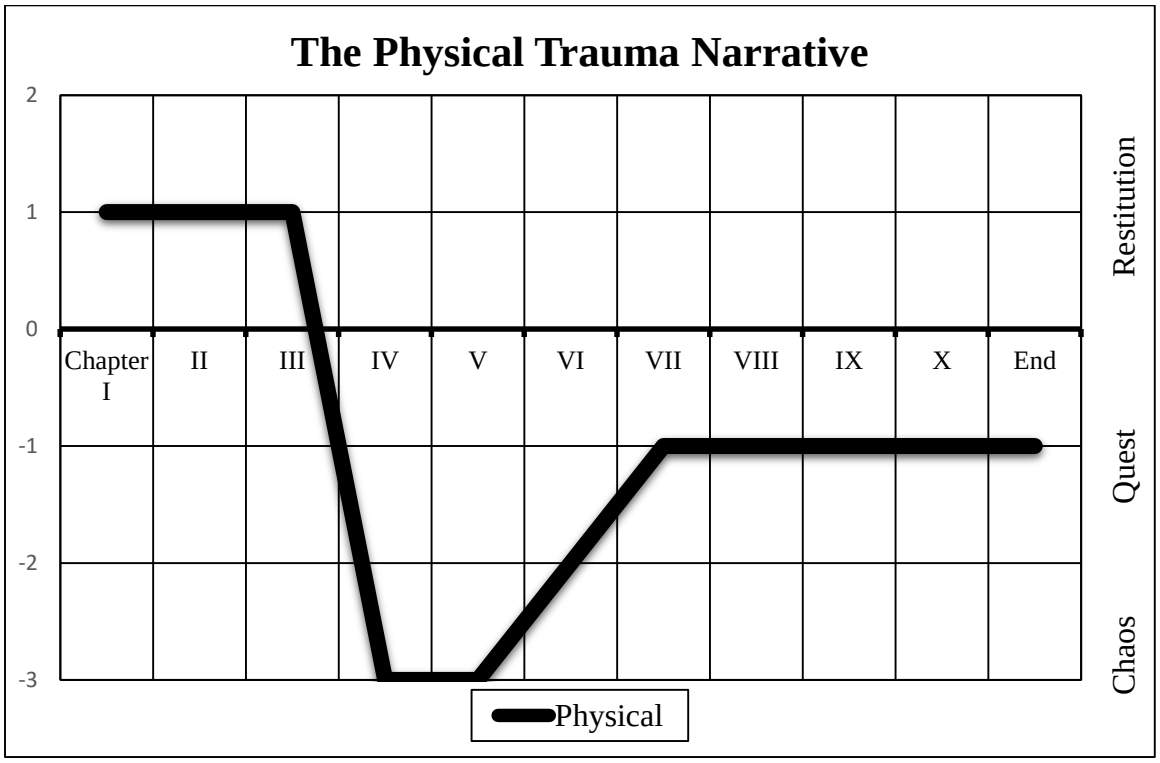

Figure 2: Physical functional mobility, pain intensity, and level of independence: -3= bedridden/intolerable pain; 1=completely mobile/no pain

[75] Quoted in Frank, 106.

[76] The criteria for assessment of Puller's physical trauma narrative are his functionality/mobility, the intensity of pain, and level of independence.

Near death, Puller experiences absolute chaos. He writes, "the unremitting pain . . . was a constant companion. . . . I was also receiving morphine injections every three or four hours, and my memory of the . . . next several weeks remains clouded" (163). His war-ravaged body becomes a sight of horror. "Society looks at people in chaos and cannot see them as part of the social body," Frank writes. The chaos overwhelms the witnesses so that they cannot see past the suffering. They cannot imagine anyone enduring the trauma. Puller claims his twin-sister later confessed that "her initial impulse on seeing [him] was to pray for [his] death" (163). The chaos is so powerful and overwhelming that it threatens all around it. Puller writes,

> Toddy was nearing the end of her pregnancy, and there was a very real danger that her anxiety and the shock caused by my wounding would precipitate an early delivery. She promised to return as soon as possible and even then left reluctantly, but I was too absorbed in my own suffering to enjoy the company for long of even those I loved most dearly. . . . I was completely helpless. (165)

The chaos narrative consumes Puller's life and endangers his wife and unborn child. [77] Reconstructing this scene, Puller seems to project his anxieties and fears that his presence burdens the lives of his family, which becomes a recurrent problem throughout the text. These fears are rooted in his military background which indoctrinates young men to believe self-reliance and freedom are the highest virtues of manhood and that his intrinsic worth depends on his independence. As he readjusts to his "helpless" body, Puller's

[77] Puller seems to be engulfed in chaos to the extent that it pollutes his immediate environment, contaminating the lives of others, including his attendees. He writes, "The second corpsman, Jack, was a manic depressive who even to me appeared so close to the verge of a nervous breakdown that it came as no surprise when he tried to slash his wrists and become a patient himself." (165)

ideological understanding of the world and social constructions of masculinity undergoes a process of rebooting.

As the process of healing begins, the chaos narrative becomes the dominant mode of story-telling, but as Puller reimagines these weeks in the hospital, he emphasizes his anesthetizing the pain with narcotics because his chemical dependence contributed to his reintegration problems for years afterwards. Lew describes the pain as suffocating and dehumanizing. Puller recollects,

> By the end of my first two weeks in the intensive care unit, the odds favoring my survival had improved considerably, although to the unpracticed eye the reverse must have seemed the case. Several times a day my bandages had to be changed, and without morphine the ordeal was so painful that I was quickly reduced to the level of a snarling animal. (165)

The pain leaves him "completely immobile" and absolutely dependent on others to sustain his life (165). The agony reduces the man to a sub-human state, "a snarling animal." The suffering deprives Puller of his most human characteristic—language. As Elaine Scarry, professor of English literature and specialist in the language of bodily pain, theorizes, "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[78] Incapable of consuming food, the corpsmen gavage Puller, force-feeding him through the nose. The barely recognizable remains of Puller's sixty-pound body were rotated constantly in a mechanized device to

[78] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford U P, 1985), 4.

help prevent the inevitable bed sores. Puller then enters a traumatic cycle of recovery and operation.

As he recovers from the surgeries, he develops addiction to opiates, and the addiction problems remain as permanent as the scars on his body. During his initial recovery from the first of many skin-grafting operations, he "live[s] in a world without color" (166). Though his body begins to heal, the chaos ensues and tortures his mind. Puller becomes dependent, "psychologically, if not physically," on morphine (166). The doctors gradually decrease the narcotic, but the weaning process is excruciating. Puller laments,

> [w]ithout the morphine to dull my senses, I had to face both physical pain and the reality of my loss, and for several days I was nothing more than a bundle of jagged nerve endings . . . . It was a period of my life during which I lost all self-respect for not having the strength to carry myself with dignity, and I loathed my country and the Marine Corps for having brought me to such depths. (166)

This passage suggests a paradoxical relationship between his body and the embodied ideals of the Marine Corps. Puller claims to have lost respect for himself for not managing an unbearable pain with "dignity," as the military had indoctrinated him to believe that respectable men do. For the first time in his life, according to Puller, he reacts against the political and ideological apparatus that he so willingly volunteered to defend with his life. At the "depths" of his physical narrative, Puller begins the lengthy process of political rebirth and the readjustment to post-war life.

Other sub-narratives take a secondary role, but are omnipresent, often times contributing to Puller's problems. The idea of physical dependence threatens the very foundation of his core values as a marine. His disability ruptures his ideological systems

of belief about manhood. His loss of independence leads to severe depression which becomes chronic throughout his life. Puller contemplates suicide for the first of several times in his life. He reimagines the state of helplessness that caused him to consider suicide:

> I lay awake and mulled over the events of the day and the utter lack of control I had over my life. . . . [T]he certainties of my life were finite and unappealing. I was turned in my bed every three hours, and in the mornings a corpsman shaved, bathed, and fed me. My dressings were then changed, and for the rest of the day various nurses and doctors prodded me as if I were a side of beef in a meat market. I no longer had any idea of my own capabilities, and whatever dignity I once possessed had abandoned me as surely as my missing limbs. For several weeks, I had been brooding over the idea of asking Toddy for a divorce since I did not feel that it was fair to force her into a lifetime of caring for a helpless cripple. I had in fact even considered suicide, but I now laughed, despite my melancholy, when I realized that I was incapable of throwing myself out of the partially open window only a few feet from my bed. (170)

In a state of passivity, he no longer has sovereignty over his own body. He has lost the self-determination and the ability to take his own life. Frank claims, "[i]n the chaos narrative, consciousness has given up the struggle for sovereignty over its own experience. When such a struggle can be told, then there is some distance from the chaos."[79] However, even at the distance from which Puller writes of this episode, nearly twenty years later, his voice is passive. In the passage above, his body is an object, not an actor. He has lost all agency and self-determination. Puller's inability to control his own body leads to frustration and internal conflict between his understanding of what it means to be a man (*i.e.* self-reliant) and the physical limitations of his body.

[79] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 104.

In order to progress in his recovery narrative, Puller must undergo a transformation in his basic self-identity and reconcile the false dichotomy between Marine and disabled man. In his struggle to accept his dependence, Puller instinctively reacts with violence against the medical personnel in the hospital. He reflects,

> [a]ll that was taken from me at the moment I was wounded, and it was difficult to adjust to being totally powerless. Many times I struck out blindly and irrationally at the corpsmen and nurses who were trying to help me, and it only increased my frustration that in my weakened state I was unable to inflict any damage on them. I now had to ask for everything, and it was damnably difficult to maintain a self-image when I was still soiling my bed (187).

The loss of control over his bodily functions can be an irreparable and humiliating loss with which he struggles to cope throughout his life. From his early childhood, Puller had been raised to emulate the ideals of the Marine Corps and embody the masculine image of the noble warrior, but his combat experiences reduce the body to an infantile state of complete dependence.

At the nadir of his physical trauma narrative, Puller's wife gives birth to a son; fatherhood reaffirms his sense of manhood and provides momentary relief and becomes the catalyst for his assent from the depths of melancholia. Puller writes,

> [b]y the time I had absorbed the news that I was a father . . . my flagging spirits had taken a sharp turn upward and I had completely abandoned the idea of leaving her. We were a real family, and despite the rocky start, I could tell . . . this child was God-sent and destined to solidify our marriage. (174-75)

His newborn son, affectionately called Lewpy, gives Puller a new determination and will to live. Puller reconstructs an image of having hit rock bottom before the birth of a son. The start was "rocky." The narrator gives the impression that the worst is finally over: his

"flagging spirits had taken a sharp turn upward," and now, he finally embarks on the road toward restitution. The writer uses language that mirrors the narrative structure of upward movement toward recovery.

Soon after the birth of his son, Lew Puller compares his own state of helplessness to that of his infant son; this reminder of his dependence counteracts the rewards of fatherhood.

Puller grows ambivalent toward his position as father; he must balance his emotions of pride and self-pity. Upon first looking at his first-born, he confesses, "I could not believe that he was so tiny and wrinkled, and it was a toss-up as to which of us was more helpless" (176). His physical disabilities disrupt the celebration of manhood that accompanies the birth of his son. Shortly after Lewpy's birth, however, Lew Puller discovers the most welcoming news. To his "amazement," he becomes aroused sexually, the first sure sign of physical recovery and a much needed source of masculinity for the young marine (176).

His quality of life seems to improve with his vitality but only momentarily; as my analysis of the text reveals, Puller lives in an insecure world. His recovery remains always vulnerable and his quality of life permanently fragile. This delicate recovery process, when reconstructed as narrative, creates a cycle of quest and movements between recovery and relapse. Puller undergoes "a lengthy operation that had life-threatening and unexpected consequences" (176). He suffers post-operation complications that nearly take his life. His "stump ruptured," and he nearly bled to death. He slowly recovers, however, and though he experience great pain, the chaos narrative does overwhelm the reader. He seems to be on the path toward recovery. A series of

operations improves Puller's quality of life, and his "world beg[ins] to expand" (177). For the first time, since his being wounded in Vietnam, he "turn[s] himself over in bed" (177). He then learns to pull himself from his wheelchair to his bed. His new sense of independence and mobility, however limited, aids his recovery process. He feels proud and accomplished. And finally, his bed sores begin to heal, relieving his daily pain tremendously. His physical recovery continues to improve as he learns to climb into bed on his own and makes "great stride[s] toward independence" (177).

With a newfound confidence and virility, Puller begins to imagine a future life with his wife and family with a semblance of normalcy, and the narrative structure rises with his spirits. He writes,

> I . . . was bitter and frustrated over what had happened to me, but from the start I was grateful that my genitalia had been spared. As a twenty-three year old male with a healthy and attractive young wife, I could not imagine a life without sex, and by the time I started on my rehabilitation, sex was very much on my mind. (179)

Puller finds the drive to enter a new stage of his recovery process. For the next several months, his daily routine revolves around physical therapy sessions. Though grueling and exhausting, Puller makes progress. By January 1969, Puller accomplishes several physical challenges, including push-ups, but his rehabilitation becomes interrupted by a cycle of reconstructive surgery and healing. Puller recovers enough to be approved for out-patient rehabilitation. He moves into an apartment with his wife and infant son. Puller seems to adjust to his dependence. He admits, [w]hen I first got home, I was unable to sit on the commode alone, and Toddy had to assist me with my most basic functions. Degrading though it was, we developed an intimacy rare in a couple" (192).

Puller emphasizes a relationship between masculinity and mobility. As his physical therapy progresses, Puller attempts to wear prosthetic legs. The prosthesis severely limits his mobility, but he continues the therapy undeterred. He gains more functioning in his hands through a series of reconstructive surgeries. The surgeries, again, stunt his progress at physical recovery. The operations render him completely dependent upon his wife for basic bodily functions and daily tasks. Puller admits that he was "never able to completely overcome the dread that accompanied [his] loss of independence after each surgery" (206). Over the next year of these cycles of surgery and recovery, he slowly realizes the futility of the prosthetic legs. Puller writes, "barring some miracle of modern medicine, I was going to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair" (246). With his mobility forever limited, Puller finds the freedom and exhilaration of driving an acceptable compromise. He installs mechanical contraptions that allow him to drive a car, and when he finally drives on his own, he feels the "enthusiasm of a boy who had just learned to ride a bicycle" (219). He recalls, the "freedom and independence were so exhilarating that when I got back to our apartment, I felt like jumping up and down" (220). His new agility allows more self-reliance. He needs no longer to rely on his wife to "chauffeur [him] to the hospital" (220). Puller says, "[f]rom the beginning of my driving I always felt less helpless and more like a man" (225).

The writer constructs a literary trope to suggest a resolution to a chapter in his life—he rides off into the sunset with his lady. Part One of his autobiography concludes with him behind the wheel, his son in the backseat and his loving wife by his side, leaving his physical trauma and his military career in a trail of dust. He creates the impression that he is moving on from his Vietnam War experience. Puller writes:

> we had passed the hospital and were headed south toward Virginia and home, and I watched the gray central spine of the hospital in my rearview mirror until it passed from sight. For a long time, neither of us spoke. When I finally turned my head toward Toddy, she smiled and squeezed my arm just above the elbow. I was a civilian for the first time in our marriage, and she was two and a half months pregnant with our second child. From the car radio a line from a song by Creedence Clearwater Revival interrupted my reverie, and I wondered if it augured well for my family: 'Tryin' to find the sun, I went down Virginia seekin' shelter from the storm.' (249)

The end of the first half of *Fortunate Son* ends with hope. Puller creates an artificial resolution, leaving his experiences in the hospital and the military in the past. The promise of new life, growing inside his pregnant wife, drives out the darkness of his narrative. The possibilities of a new start suggest that the worst could be finally over. The scene in which the family drives away from the hospital into the sunset gives readers an impression of happily ever-after, but the most difficult and challenging obstacles are still ahead. When Puller returned from Vietnam, he remained isolated in a hospital. His injuries delayed the difficult transition process from military to peaceful society. "When liberation from the hospital comes, as welcome as it is, one's real trouble begins: the trouble of remaking a sense of purpose as the world demands," Frank writes.[80] The ominous foreshadowing reveals that Puller has a difficult recovery ahead. He cannot look away from the past as he stares into the rearview mirror. The Creedence Clearwater Revival lyrics hint toward the problems he will encounter: "seeking shelter from the storm."

[80] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 105.

CHAPTER III

THE SOCIAL NARRATIVE

This chapter discusses the ways in which Lew Puller's wounds affect his social life and analyzes the resolutions that he constructed throughout the social narrative in the autobiography. The first section addresses the relationship between Lew and his father Chesty. Along with the father/son relationship in a military culture, this section examines the transformation in Lew's understanding of social constructions and gender. Puller's views of masculinity hinge on the image of his father and the mythologized persona of the war hero. The son must confront the impossibility of reaching the unattainable standards by which he judges his manhood—the legend of his father. Finally, Lew inherited his political and ideological worldviews from Chesty Puller and the "Old Breed" of Marines that the war hero symbolized, a conservative war-hawk, with duty and honor at the center of what it means to be a man and an American patriot. As Lew grieves his father's death, he experiences a political awakening and ideological rebirth, which will be explicated in Chapter 4.

Part One of *Fortunate Son* describes Puller's path toward and immediate survival of the Vietnam War; Part Two relates his struggles to overcome the lasting effects of the war. In an interview, after the book's publication, Puller says, "I think it's a bigger book

than Vietnam." The book is as much about relationships as it is about war. Puller continues,

> This book is certainly about some difficult things, but it's about some beautiful things too. It's about the power of love and relationship between a man and a woman, and a man and his father, and a man and his son, and a man and his country, and a man himself, and those are all love relationships, which are all resolved satisfactorily.[81]

After Puller's release from the hospital, he faces his most difficult and heart-wrenching challenges. His social narrative relates some of the most tragic aspects of his life. As this essay will demonstrate, however, these relationships remain unresolved, despite Puller's comments. His struggles with addiction and alcoholism irrevocably damage his marriage and his relationships with his children. His father dies without the opportunity to communicate to one another. His political and ideological views shift 180 degrees, and finally, his suicide confirms that he remained vulnerable to his war-traumas decades after his wounding.

[81] Lewis B. Puller, Jr., interview by Brian Lamb, *Booknotes*, C-Span. May 24, 1991. http://www.booknotes.org/Watch/26188-1/Lewis+Puller+Jr.aspx

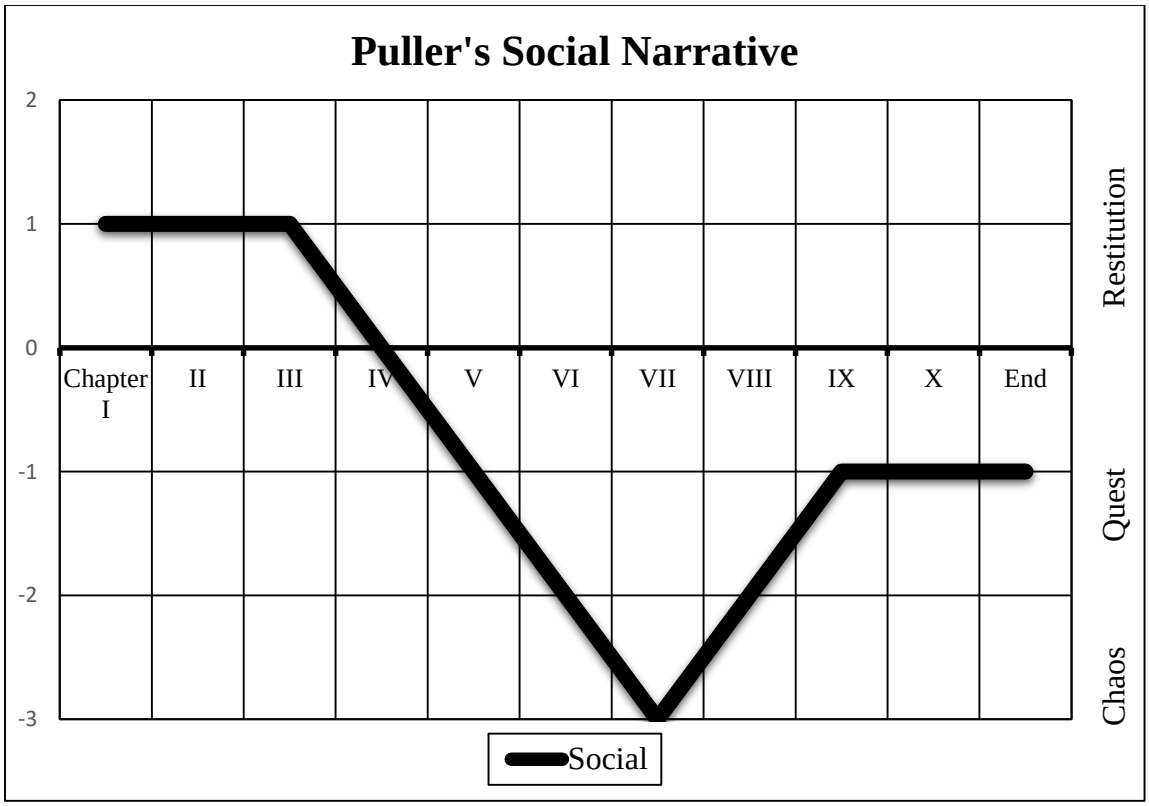

Figure 3: Social functioning scale: -3=extremely dysfunctional; 1=functional

As Figure 3 illustrates, [82] Puller's social life takes years to rebuild after his physical recovery, but his social relationships are far from "resolved satisfactorily" at the end of his autobiography. The book ends in a time of relative stability in his life, but his relationships were fragile and remained on the verge of dissolution. Puller suggests that

[82] The Social Functioning Scale as seen in Figure 4 has been modified from the "Work and Social Adjustment Scale" (WSAS) developed by James C. Mundt. The WSAS assesses depression using an eight-point scale: 0=no impairment 8=severe impairment. The assessment evaluates social adjustment on the following criteria: family relationships; career/work; home life/management: paying bills, etc.; leisure activities: social gatherings, dating, etc.; private leisure activities: reading, hobbies, etc.; See the following: James C. Mundt, et al., "The Work and Social Adjustment Scale: A Simple Measurement of Impairment in Function," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 180, (2002): 461-64. Doi: 10.1192/bjp.1

The most relevant criteria, which has been selected to develop the Social Functioning Narrative Graph, in *Fortunate Son* are the following: family relationships; career; social activities and gatherings with friends; relationships with other veterans; American government and society. The eight-point measure scale has been simplified to a four-point numeric scale, which similar to the Quality of Life Assessment Scale, should be considered more relative and qualitative, than a clinical quantitative assessment. Once again, Arthur Frank's terms restitution and chaos have been employed to analyze Puller's social narrative.

the most difficult part of his life to narrate was the relationship between himself and his father, and the decline of his father's health. In his interview with Brian Lamb, Puller claims, "I think the most powerful part is the part about my father's decline and death and my coming to grips with that."[83] Lewis Puller's father is the most decorated marine in U.S. history. To the Marine Corps, Chesty Puller is more than a war hero, more than a mortal man; to many, Chesty Puller was a god of war, Aries reincarnated. It is common folklore that marines, before they fall asleep, say "Good night, Chesty, wherever you are," a ritual similar to praying each night. It is against this mythologized image that Lewis Puller compared himself, resulting in self-doubt and guilt which haunted him throughout his life.

"From the day he is born inside the Fortress, a son is subject to unending critical scrutiny," Mary Wertsch notes, and "[e]very detail of his appearance and behavior is measured against warrior ideals of manliness."[84] Wertsch claims, "the sons of warriors bask in the glow of their father's reflected glory, the cumulative glory of all the ages which resides in the person of every warrior . . . . The soldier-hero is not a storybook abstraction for the sons of warriors."[85] It is worth noting and discussing both the strengths and limitations in the work of Mary Wertschh, a military "brat" herself, a journalist, and expert on military family culture. Wertsch interviewed nearly eighty sons and daughters of military servicemen. She attempts to present a collective experience of childhood in

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[83] Lewis B. Puller, Jr., interview by Brian Lamb, *Booknotes*, C-Span. May 24, 1991. http://www.booknotes.org/Watch/26188-1/Lewis+Puller+Jr.aspx

[84] Mary E. Wertsch, *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood inside the Fortress,* (New York: Harmony, 1991), 141.

[85] Wertsch, *Military Brats,* 144.

military families by interweaving those narratives together and providing critical analysis. Despite its limitations,[86] generalizations, and assumptions, her observations on childhood in military culture reveal the ways that Chesty Puller could have influenced Lew's worldview and his decision to fight in Vietnam. The exceedingly high standards of military service that Chesty Puller set became a source of Lew's guilt and his inability to consider his service honorable.

The heroic image of the father has tangible effects on Puller's military service and post-war life. Puller experiences a crisis of identity resulting from constantly measuring his own manliness and self-worth against his father's legendary warrior status—a comparison, not as son to father but as man to myth. Chesty Puller's status as cultural icon and war hero damaged Lew's self-image and self-esteem and emasculated him. Tracy Karner argues that the traditional view of masculinity in America shifted during the Vietnam War era as evident in life narratives of Vietnam veterans. He notes the tendency of veterans to gauge their own manhood by the image of WWII fathers. Karner asserts, "the cultural models of patriarchal authority in America did not match these men's combat experience or help them come to terms with the public perception of Vietnam and their roles as warriors. Indeed, when they looked to the images of war and its attendant male adulthood, the social definitions of masculinity, soldier, breadwinner, and family man often represented elusive ideals that only contributed to a sense of failure

[86] One major limitation of her study involves her decision to give anonymity to her interviewees. Since the content of the interviews are unverifiable and the interviews are unavailable to other researchers, one must rely on the integrity of the author and her interpretations. Another limitation, as Wertsch mentions in her preface, involves her emphasis on the children whose lives were negatively affected my military "and suffered in the course of their rearing inside the fortress" as well as the lack of diversity in the interviewees. Westsch, xiv-xv. Wertsch's work seems relevant to and illuminative into the relationship between Lew and Chesty, even if it is not representative of all military families.

and unattainable manhood."[87] These effects seem intensified in the narrative of Lew Puller because his father's image dominates the cultural model of war hero in the twentieth century. If for the many Vietnam veterans, these images of masculinity were elusive, in Lew's life they were inescapable.

After Puller's less-than-glorious return from war as a wounded soldier, he describes himself as having failed to live up to his father's expectations. From his childhood, Puller imagined having had two fathers: the legendary warrior, and the other, a loving and nurturing father. Puller recalls his recollections of his father as a teenager on the cusp of manhood:

> As I grew older and began the sometimes painful process by which a son distances himself from his father in preparation for striking out on his own, I began to realize that my father the man and my father the legend were not always one and the same. The legend was all powerful, fearless in the face of any challenge or adversity, and incapable of mistakes in judgment or unfairness in dealing with lesser mortals. (27)

During Lewis's 11th grade year, his father falls ill. For the first time in the young Puller's life, his father showed signs of weakness, marks of his mortality. Puller reflects that he had never felt as close to his father as he did during the recovery period. His father discussed fears about death and illness, but he also expressed a hope for Lew to carry on the "Puller name" and legacy. Puller reflects, "[w]e did not talk about the military or my attempting to follow in his footsteps, but even then there were some unstated assumptions about the course my life would take" (29). Since his childhood, Lew Puller believed he

[87] Tracy Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *American Studies* 37, no.1 (1996): 64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642783

was predestined to go to war, as a rite of passage and as a fulfillment of his father's legacy. He claims, military service "rested powerfully on my young psyche, and without my father's ever saying a word, I knew that someday I would be enlisting in some as yet undetermined cause" (29). It takes half a lifetime, the Vietnam War, and severe injury for Puller to realize that he "could never hope to emulate the legend that was Chesty Puller" (29).

The Vietnam War created an irreconcilable gulf between Puller's expectations of war and his actual lived experiences. These ruptures resulted in problems of self-identity and ideological shifts away from a pro-war worldview later in Puller's life. He advocated veterans' rights throughout the latter part of his life, but he became an outspoken opponent of interventionist policies and the aggressive politics that risk war. Puller measured himself against the legend of Chesty Puller, not the man, and after experiencing the trauma of the Vietnam War, he dissociated himself from the old guard—the military order that Chesty Puller symbolized. As Tracy Karner writes, "Vietnam, it has been said, was first and foremost a division of sons from their fathers."[88] Although the war divides Lew from his father's legend, the traumatic experience strengthens the emotional bond between him and his father because both men had known the loss and pain of war. In the hospital, as Puller lies wounded and in critical condition, the scene opens with his father's visit. His father first saw him in his near-death state. Puller recalls:

> He stood quietly at the foot of my bed for a few moments, surveyed the wreckage of his only son, and then, unable to maintain his stoic demeanor, began weeping silently. . . . I in my hopeless state was unable to reach out or otherwise console him. It was the second time in my life that I had

[88] Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam," 63.

> seen my father cry, and . . . I felt an aching in my heart that all but eclipsed the physical pain from my wounds. (162)

In this scene, the writer constructs an intimate portrait of Chesty Puller, one that contrasts the battle-hardened war hero. The aged father in this scene appears as a far more human than compared to the younger marine who, as he saw his only son, Lew, off to war, "advised him to come back with his shield or on it" (58).[89] At one of the most critical scenes of the book, Lew depicts his father as a kind, loving, and empathetic man, not necessarily traits one associates with a war hero.

Fortunate Son centers on the relationship between father and son and captures the sometimes contradictory dynamics of affection and masculinity within a military family. Chesty's health declines exponentially, but not before he meets his grandson, Lewpy. In the scenes that follow, Puller reveals more of his father's sentimental side. His father cries once again upon hearing that his grandson would carry on his name, Lewis B. Puller III, but "unlike the two earlier occasions, when [Lew] shared his sorrow, this time his tears were of joy" (175). Puller writes,

> It was also particularly heartwarming to watch Father play with his grandson that weekend and to share his pleasure each time the baby would reach out to grasp his extended finger. My father was in many ways a simple man with simple needs, but high on his list of priorities was his often-stated wish to see the Puller name perpetuated. Young Lewis was the last of his bloodline, and Toddy and I were deeply moved to see this wonderful old man become a witness to his namesake's emerging sense of self. (202)

The passage emphasizes the joy in a grandfather's connection with a grandson, and the "share[d] pleasure" when they reached out and grasped fingers. The scene appears

[89]Although as Puller reveals, his father had, at the scene of his departure for Vietnam, had not completed the speech, and instead hugged his only son.

metaphorical of the bond of kinship and the tradition of passing on the legacy to a next generation. The author constructs this intergenerational connection as a resolution to the life of Chesty Puller and his fulfillment of a desire to see his name live on.

The moment of resolution is fleeting, however, and the chaos narrative reemerges with the decline of Chesty's health and prolonged death. Exactly two years after Puller was wounded in Vietnam, his father has a debilitating stroke. Puller recreates the memory of seeing his once powerful father in a state of helplessness:

> My father lay bare-chested on his back in the middle of a sterile field of starched white sheets, and his hands secured to the chrome rails of his bed by restraining straps. He was struggling hard against the straps, but his movements were convulsive, and he seemed unaware of his condition. . . . [T]he respirator tube that was taped to his nose made an obscene rhythmic sucking noise that for a few moments was the only sound in the room. My first impulse was to pull the tube from his nose. (256)

The straps and the tubes give the impression of a torture scene. Seizing his dying body, the convulsions are his body's only natural reflex. This image of his father haunts Puller's memories. As he day dreams, awaiting an update on his father's medical condition, his thoughts "replayed [his] first sight of him in intensive care" (257). Puller had drawn his strength from his father all of his life, and in a moment of introspection, he began to recognize how much need he still needed his father. He writes, "I did know that I needed his help in coming to terms with my own experience," but "there was very little strength left in my father on which I could draw (257). This hospital scene reveals a relationship between father and son that had been constrained by the societal expectations of masculinity, in which men neither express physical or emotional weakness nor ask for

help. This scene reveals the writer's sense of guilt for his inability to communicate with his father and his regret for words left unspoken.

Fortunate Son articulates the trauma of war and its lasting impact on families and illustrates the dynamics of father/son military legacies. After Chesty survives a stroke, Lew attempts to communicate with his father and seek his counsel. His father and mother visit shortly after the birth of Puller's daughter. Puller had been struggling to come to terms with his war experience and the rejection he felt from the public. Left to themselves, Chesty and Lewis try to converse and attempt to understand one another. Puller recounts their first and final conversation about the Vietnam War:

> his faltering efforts to begin sentences made it obvious that something was bothering him. . . . I gradually became aware that he was trying to discuss the war with me. When I realized how important the conversation seemed to him, I tried desperately to fill in the gaps in his phrases and to anticipate what his questions were, but the effort was heart-wrenching for both of us. He seemed to understand that the United States was not winning the war, a situation he found bewildering, and he wanted to know how I was handling our lack of positive results. I tried to assure him that I was fine; but my words had a hollow ring even to me, and I realized this dear sick old man knew the agony in my heart and what trouble I was having finding meaning in my experience. . . . It was the only conversation my father and I ever had about the war. As I look back on it, I find it excruciatingly sad that while my father was ready to talk about it, he was unable, and while I was able, I was unready. (262)

Puller had been feeling betrayed by his government and thought his losses were in vain. The grueling efforts to communicate fail. The tension in this scene reveals an inaudible desperation. Chesty's stroke had left him voiceless and powerless to counsel his son. The sense of frustration between the father and son mirror the frustrations so symbolic of the Vietnam War. His father reaches out desperately, but the moment slips through Puller's

war-torn fingers. The unresolved regret trembles in his voice, as he expresses the evanescence of last chances and lost opportunities.

Lew Puller constructs the death of his father as an allegory of the United States military and the declining support of the American War in Vietnam. Over the next year after having a stroke in October 1970, Chesty Puller's health deteriorates, along with Lew's ideals of patriotism and illusions of American exceptionalism and moral superiority. Chesty becomes symbolic of the once invincible strength of United States, and as his body fails him, Lew realizes that America was losing its first war. Once Chesty dies, Lewis undergoes an intense ideological shock and political rebirth, severing his allegiance to conservative politics and the pro-war faction in the U.S.

In October 1971, three years to the date of his own wounding in Vietnam, Lewis received the news that his father had contracted pneumonia. Chesty was, for the first time in his life, losing the battle. Puller writes, "[a]fter what seemed an eternity, Father's doctors came in to say heroic measures were now pointless" (268). After the mother and sister said their goodbyes, Lewis gives the consent to cut the life support. Puller recalls,

> When I wheeled up to his bedside and locked the brakes on my chair, he looked frail and delicate in the dim light and deepening shadows around him, and holding his unresponsive hand, I saw that his reservoir of strength, once seemingly inexhaustible, was now almost used up. (269)

As "deepening shadows" of death appear, Chesty Puller has been reduced from a legendary symbol of war and pillar of manhood to a mortal. The way that Puller depicts this death scene appears most significant because the last memory of his father is accompanied with regret. Puller continues,

> After several more minutes, he struggled to take a few shallow breaths, his chest rattled through one last exhilaration, and he was still. As I watched, a single tear formed in the corner of his right eye and trickled slowly down his cheek. Although I knew it was involuntary, I saw the tear as his parting gift to his only son, and I laid my head on my dead father's chest and wept for a lifetime of missed opportunities. (269)

The voluntary tear in his dead father's eye becomes an emblem of Chesty's release from the socialization of the Marine Corps mentality in which the warrior must restrain himself, never express emotion, and never cry. Similarly, a warrior father projects those ideals of martial manliness onto the son. As Mary Wertsch suggests of military families, "[f]rom the beginning a son is expected to work toward merging himself with the warrior image. He is taught to bear pain with courage and self-discipline."[90] The "tear as his parting gift" relieves Lewis from the burdens of warrior indoctrination and allows him finally to express his emotions to his father. Lewis grieves for the failed relationship, as he "wept for a lifetime of missed opportunities."

The long and "protracted" decline of Chesty's health had contributed to Puller's ability to accept the death of his father, but he admits "I also hoped that now that he was dead I could stop feeling as though I were living in his immense shadow" (270). Puller mourns the loss of his father but not the legend. He claims, "Already I missed my father terribly, but I missed the man who had nurtured me through my youth and early manhood, not the legend against whom I had measured myself for so long" (270). Puller recognizes that his legendary father represents the forces of patriotism, military power, and Cold War ideology which had propelled him to fight in the rice paddies of Vietnam.

[90] Wertsch, *Military Brats,* 144.

For the heroic figure, Puller sheds no tears. Puller recounts "[a]s darkness fell and I took leave of his grave, I wanted him back and I wanted him gone" (274).

The ambivalence with which he depicts his relationship to his father closely resembles, and seems inseparable from, the ambivalence he feels toward his country. Puller reflects, "[f]ollowing my father's death and for years thereafter, I tried to put the Vietnam experience behind me and dissociate myself from the military community" (274). In his work on the myth of the hero of the Vietnam era, R.J. Fertel explains, "[a]mong many traumas Vietnam will present the young man, it is the traumatic death of this idealized vision of the hero that must first be undergone if he is to enter into man's true hero's quest."[91] The death of Puller's father marks the clearest beginning of a new narrative, a quest narrative. But, the chaos lies dormant, in waiting; Puller's life embodies the sermon given at his father's gravesite: "'Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down" (272). This quotation foretells the trials that Puller undergoes during his post-war life.

[91] R. J. Fertel, "Vietnam War Narratives and the Myth of the Hero," *War, Literature and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 11 no. 1 (1999): 270. http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=36da45d6-5426-4069-b97d-1a77d93987ad%40sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=109.

CHAPTER IV

THE IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

Before examining the Ideological Narrative of *Fortunate Son*, it seems necessary to explain the usage of the term "ideological shock." I developed the term ideological shock because no single term exists to define this form of trauma. Its effects are as intense as, but different from, moral injury. This phenomenon exists in a number of accounts which relate these similar experiences: the Vietnam War era soldier joins the military, answering Kennedy's calls in his Inaugural Address, and having preconceptions of war based upon the representations of war by male role models or depictions Hollywood films, typically John Wayne films, but when he experiences war firsthand, a rift grows between his understanding of the world and his experience of the world. Historian Christian G. Appy undertakes the challenge of documenting the cultural shift that occurred as a result of the Vietnam War in his book *American Reckoning*. Appy argues that the "War shattered the central tenet of American national identity"—what he refers to as American exceptionalism. "So deep were those convictions" about the moral superiority of the U.S. and its institutions, that "they took on the power of myth—they

were beyond debate."[92] Men confronted these illusions while on the ground in Vietnam, and the sudden impact of the realities of combat dissolved romanticized myths of war and had a tangible effect on the individuals and how they reacted within socio-political contexts.

Philip Caputo describes the circumstances that lead to ideological shock in *A Rumor of War*: "War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to 'ask what you can do for your country' and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us. America seemed omnipotent then . . . . [W]e saw ourselves as the champions of 'a cause that was destined to triumph.' So, . . . we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that . . . we were doing something noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost."[93] Many veterans describe the realizations that they had been misled to believe in an inherent justness of U.S. intervention in Vietnam as a feeling of betrayal. The actual lived-experiences of war, as Lloyd B. Lewis argues, "made a whole generation of fathers look like liars and betrayers and a whole generation of sons victims" of their rites of passage into the masculine worlds of soldiers.[94] Lewis argues in his book *The Tainted* War that soldiers in Vietnam discovered that war had been misrepresented and propagandized by media and culture, and realized that Vietnam was nothing like World War II. The disconnect changed the Vietnam soldier's ideological

[92] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Viking, 2015), xiii-xiv.
[93] Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, xiv.

[94] Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 50.

understanding of war and society and so they questioned cultural values of honor and duty. Lewis claims that in the absence of constructions of honor, the expectations of military conduct became less enforced; war became a struggle for survival which led to atrocities. I would add that war has always involved atrocity, but in Vietnam, when the notions of just war, duty, and honor were blurred, and America's image of a global force of good was challenged, soldiers found it more difficult to accept that the amount of death in war was a necessary sacrifice for a greater cause. The dehumanization in a conflict that measured victory by high body count combined with the ambivalence of the goals and purposes led to unresolved ideological traumas. Along with the futility of those deaths and the disastrous outcome, it is no surprise that veterans of the war have become infamously associated with atrocity and the psychological problems that followed them home.

These expressions of betrayal and reactions manifested during the reintegration episodes as political dissent and rejection of the military. The visible results of ideological shock were mass demonstrations and veterans' anti-war movements, including the influential Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). The movement resulted in thousands of Vietnam veterans rejecting the Good War myth and the traditional vestiges of martial honor. Veterans descended upon Washington and tossed their medals on the steps of the Capitol Building. The recognition of U.S. participation in an unjust war, led by the VVAW, resulted in the Winter Soldier Investigations of U.S. war crimes and violations of the Geneva Convention.[95] These intensely personal feelings

[95] See also, Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: Twayne, 1997).

of betrayal contributed to the collective and socio-political efforts of veterans of the war to resist patriotic ideals and a government that drafted citizens into a war that so many opposed. Their dissent portrayed the United States' intervention in the Second Indo-China War as unjust and the acts of soldiers as war crimes. These ideological ruptures led to veterans working against the power systems for which they risked their lives.[96]

War medals became symbolic of the superficiality of martial valor during the anti-war movement. As Puller began to consider his war-injuries in vain, he questioned the worth of his Silver Star. These dilemmas are products of ideological shock. He thought seriously about joining other veterans, when they rejected their medals in protest of the war. Following the scene in which he failed to communicate with his dying father, Lew Puller grapples with his previously unquestioned ideologies. Puller writes, "They were now saying that their sacrifices had been meaningless, that my sacrifice had been meaningless. . . . For years I had been hearing similar rhetoric from antiwar spokesmen whose ideology was foreign to me, but I was now hearing it from those young men whose kinship with me had been forged in the bloody crucible of Vietnam, and its impact, like a fog lifting from a shrouded landscape, stripped me of my remaining self-delusions" (263). Although Puller decided not to part with his medals, he seems to reject the notions of honor and valor that the medals represent, as well as the privilege of those who are recognized and the exclusivity of those who are denied the medals. It is no coincidence that he contrasts the scene of the dying war hero with the Vietnam Veterans

[96] Jonathan Shay describes a similar trauma, using the Ancient Greek idea of *themis.* Using the Ancient Greek poets, Shay discusses the "stability and reliability of *themis*." He writes, that the "undoing of character" results from the "betrayal of *themis* by power holders." This "dimension of trauma destroys virtue, undoes good character." Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (Atheneum, NY: Macmillan, 1994), 37.

Against the War. This juxtaposition demonstrates not only his social and political evolution, but also his struggles to come to terms with his own service and the trauma from which his guilt originates—the moment of his own destruction and reconstruction—his wounding. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War movement had a significant impact upon the ways in which Puller valued himself and viewed the war experience. His ideologies began to evolve with the realization that his fellow soldiers had begun to reject the myth of the just war. Historian John M. Kinder writes, "As the war [in Vietnam] dragged on, the ideological assertion at the heart of the Good War narrative—that sacrifice was a tolerable and necessary price to pay for freedom and progress—was thrown into stark relief, and disabled veterans emerged as powerful symbols of personal outrage and national guilt."[97] Puller constructs and actively shapes himself as a symbol of the Vietnam War: a young man seduced by the drums of war, disabled by the enemy, betrayed by country, and reborn into an image of determination and hope from which disabled veterans could draw strength.

Lew Puller decided to challenge the system from within and use his influence as the son Chesty Puller to advocate for the less fortunate sons and less-privileged veterans. Puller writes that during the summer of 1973 as the "Watergate hearings held America in thrall," he realized that he "owed it to [his] fellow veterans to spend at least part of [his] career addressing veterans' concerns" as a lawyer (278). As the country distrusted the corrupt administration for which American veterans had served, the veterans relied on themselves for assistance and joined various veterans' organizations for support. Puller carries on the *espirit de corps* of the Marines by dedicating his life to serving other

[97] Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies*, 277.

veterans as a continuation of the leave-no-man-behind mentality of the Marines. Although he does not repudiate every tradition of the Corps, Puller's ideological shock precipitates a political rebirth. He begins to criticize governmental policies and military intervention. Puller describes his political evolution:

> Before the war it had never occurred to me to question the wisdom of our political or military leaders or the judgments of the leaders of corporate America. Now, as I looked around and saw the brokers of policies that were causing the meaningless deaths of American and Vietnamese boys without any consequences to themselves, I became cynical and completely distrustful of the wisdom that I had heretofore taken on faith. When I began to see my wartime comrades, most of whom were drawn from the lower rungs of society, had fought ostensibly to preserve institutions and ways of life from which they had no real expectations of benefitting, I questioned the democratic process and at the same time became more convinced that my allegiance lay with the Democratic party. (276)

Though angry and cynical, he used his frustrations over the war as motivation to make change. During the year preceding his father's death, Lewis had enrolled in law school, determined to make sense of his experience and advocate for the rights of his fellow Vietnam veterans, whose rights and dignity and been trampled during the era. Puller's status as disabled perhaps illuminated the institutional privileges that certain groups enjoy in the U.S. and helped him realize the necessity of political reform within the system. The realization of these social disparities becomes the catalyst in his efforts to support veterans' rights and legislation, as well as the philanthropic endeavors he pursued later in his life.

Puller's ideological narrative depicts a quest that begins with his questioning his complicity and participation in a war he considered unjust and his trying to find some greater meaning in his losses. As Arthur Frank observes, "quest is defined by the ill

person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience."[98] Puller's ideological quest involves a rise to the political stage. Yet, Puller admits that his "feelings about the war continued to smolder beneath the surface and sometimes vented themselves in self-destructive and occasionally surprising ways." (275). Arthur Frank explains, "[t]hough both restitution and chaos remain background voices when the quest is foreground, the quest narrative speaks from the ill person's perspective and holds the chaos at bay."[99]

Beginning in 1969, Lew Puller begins to undergo an ideological and political shift to the left. This phase of Puller's narrative appears similar to "automythology," as Frank describes it, and "[t]he dominant metaphor of the automythology is the Phoenix, reinventing itself following massive trauma or catastrophic illness."[100] In the absence of his father, Puller forms his own identity and undertakes his own cause. While recovering from his war-injuries, he begins to imagine himself as a champion of veterans' rights and decides to save lives rather than destroy them. He becomes determined to make a change within the political system that had sent him nearly to his death. Puller believes he had survived unimaginable circumstances and certain death to serve a greater purpose, a political *renaissance*. As Frank suggests, "[a]utomythology fashions the author as one who not only has survived but been reborn."[101]

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[98] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 115.

[99] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 115.

[100] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 122.

[101] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 123.
It is worth noting that Frank's explanation of automythology only has limited application to Puller's narrative. Puller's is also a manifesto. Franks says, "Like the manifesto, automythology reaches out, but its language is more personal than political. Individual change, not social reform is emphasized, with the author the exemplar of this change" (123). Puller's ultimate goal is social reform and political reform.

Before his quest gets underway, however, his traumas resurface. Because he had been depressed and drinking heavily to drown his memories and frustrations of the war, Puller decides to seek counseling. His psychiatrist advises that he begin to express himself more freely over his views on the Vietnam War, views that "society demanded he keep bottled up" (279). For the first time since the war, Puller confronts the ideological apparatus for which he sacrificed his body. He relates his sense of betrayal:

> I was angry and bitter that my country had sent me off to be maimed for life in a senseless war and then failed to recognize my sacrifices, but I was angrier still that I was now reduced to pretending that nothing was wrong. It was one thing, I recognized, for my country to have forgotten who I was and what I had been through, but if I allowed myself to forget, I would have lost my soul. (279)

His remarks are common to the Vietnam War veteran's experience. In the latter years of the war, the American public had grown war weary. Citizens were pounded by images of the war, televised into their living rooms. As their impatience grew with the lack of progress in Vietnam and as the media flooded their living rooms with images of atrocities, American civilians turned their backs on the soldiers along with the administration. The soldiers endured their traumas, rarely seeking counseling. Some considered that asking for help violated the code of masculinity that soldiers were expected to uphold. Others lacked the financial resources to seek therapeutic services. Generally, many Vietnam veterans were reluctant to express their views for fear of ostracism. For Puller, the counseling seems to have provided temporary relief from his

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Perhaps a more accurate label of more accurate label of Puller's autobiography is in fact a manifesto. Frank claims, "[t]he least gentle quest stories are *manifestos.* In these stories the truth that has been learned is prophetic, often carrying demands for social action. . . . These writers do not want to go back to a former state of health, which is often viewed as a naïve illusion" (120-21). Complex narratives often take on facets of several various narrative models.

problems. Puller finds an outlet to express himself. During the counseling sessions, Puller manages to keep "at bay the devils that tormented" him, but he admits, "I came no closer to resolving my feelings about the war, my role in it, and the attitude of my country toward my commitment" (279-280). Counseling allows Puller to "hold the chaos at bay" long enough for him to continue his quest.[102] The relief he gains in psychiatry "enables [him] to remain functional" during his last remaining year of law school and momentarily "to overcome [his] depression" (280).

The need to find a nobler cause for his personal losses drives the next part of his narrative. Puller begins to recreate himself as a defender of veterans' rights and an advocate of betrayed and forgotten soldiers. He uses his status as the "fortunate son" of Chesty Puller to become spokesman of Vietnam veteran concerns. Puller begins working for the Veteran's Administration while still struggling to adjust to his ideological shock. As American forces pull out of Saigon and the Thieu regime crumbles, Puller concludes his "sacrifices had been for naught." He reflects that the Vietnam War, "had created a grotesque scar on the American people . . . as long-lasting as the scars that [he] would carry to the grave" (284). He views the capitulation as not a peace with honor, but rather a catastrophic failure in a war that should have never happened. Shortly thereafter, in 1974 under the Ford administration, Puller joins the Clemency Board and reviews draft evaders and deserters to determine penalties, all under the "spirit of forgiveness" (285). Puller remarks, "it was unsettling to me that the individuals most directly affected by the war should now require forgiveness while the architects of the war bore no stigma at all" (285). His position as a member of the Clemency Board affects Puller tremendously and

[102] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 115.

working within the system furthers his political reawakening as he acknowledged the hypocrisy of a bureaucratic system that penalizes civil dissent. He discusses the difficulties of his position:

> To this day I think we, as board members, were in the business of determining the guilt of the wrong people, and it was for me as shattering an experience as the loss of my legs and a dozen good friends in Vietnam to discover face-to-face the arrogance and the blindness that so often passed for leadership during the Vietnam era. (290)

As Chapter VI ends, however, again we see the problem of resolution. The Board's "forgiveness" of draft evaders and deserters fails to bring the reconciliation of a nation divided by war. Instead, it recalled unresolved tensions. Puller feels many were unjustly persecuted and the wounds of Vietnam were re-opened. Nevertheless, out of the disillusionment he experienced working as a board member, Puller finds his calling in the public service of veterans. Puller realizes, though, that he has higher ambitions and he did not want to become a cog in the bureaucratic nightmare of the Veterans Administration. He determines that to make any effective change, he would run for office as a legislator.

During the next phase of Puller's quest, he creates an antagonist symbol that embodies all he had grown to detest about the U.S. war policies and the privileges of wealthy politicians (or their sons) who used their status to avoid combat and attain deferments. The antagonist is a corrupted politician and political rival, Paul Trible, a young Republican Representative from Puller's home district.[103] Puller writes,

> I had no doubt that Paul Trible, who was now loudly proclaiming the necessity of a national defense second to

[103] Oliver Stone, in his 1986 film, *Platoon*, also creates an antagonist figure, representative of a specific aspect of the war: Sergeant Bob Barnes, played by Tom Berenger. The figure represents the merciless soldier, who values victory over morality and has little regard for human life. The character embodies the media's representation of Vietnam War veterans as criminals.

> none and a hard line toward communism, had engineered a questionable deferment to avoid the war that had killed a dozen of my friends. I despised him for having been spared the most catastrophic episode of our generation, and I vowed that . . . I would oppose him in his bid for reelection. (293)

The flag-waving, war drum-beating, "Red-baiting," antagonist represents the ideologies which Puller had rejected and symbolizes the corrupted political apparatus which sent him and other young men to fight the Vietnam War (295). Beyond the physical man, Paul Trible, the antagonist symbol in the autobiography is a product of Puller's trauma, created in an attempt to situate his war-trauma and reintegration experience within historical context. Kalí Tal argues about trauma in literature that "[o]nly in memory or in narrative can war be elevated to the level of symbol. Narratives are generated in order to explain, rationalize, and define events. The symbols which these narrators create are born out of the traumatic events of wartime."[104] Puller recollects his feelings after the election, "[i]n my depressed state, I began to despise Paul Trible and his victory with an intensity I had never felt toward any other man, and my contempt for him expanded to encompass most of the young men in my generation who had found ways to avoid war experience" (331).

Puller constructs Trible with characteristics of evil villain in a work of fiction. His contempt for the politician continues to build after he moved into Lew's neighborhood. Puller claims, "[o]n one occasion my wife even found his car parked in the handicapped parking section that I used" (331). By violating the space of the disabled, Trible becomes the antithesis of the rehabilitation quest. In the autobiography, Trible becomes more than

[104] Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76.

a political rival; he takes on the role of Puller's mortal enemy and someone who not only manipulates the democratic system but as someone who disregards the law. Puller's political campaign against him becomes a metaphorical clash of good versus evil. This explication of character development in non-fiction reveals an interesting insight into the nature of trauma narratives. The trauma survivor, at least in Puller's autobiography, attempts to make sense of the world by narrating his life as a struggle for morality as he clashes against an immoral world. Puller has written himself as a martyr. Representative Trible built his political platform on pro-war sentiments, warmongering while dodging military service himself. In the text, Trible seems to be the only obstacle in the way of Puller's ability to make social change and governmental reform from inside the system.

Puller confronts another challenge in his rise to political prominence though, which inhibits the recovery process. He could not use his military service as a campaign platform, and despite their backgrounds, Trible "proved far more adept than [Puller] at wrapping himself in the American flag" (300). The revelation is disheartening. His military service became a severe disadvantage politically and was viewed with "hostility" (300). Pullers writes, " if I could not run on my war record, my service had been in vain" (301). In one of his earlier speeches, Puller's rhetoric is cogent and moving, but ineffective, nonetheless:

> When I began to speak of the young men, both black and white but all poor and uneducated, who made up the bulk of infantry and who took a disproportionately high percentage of casualties, the room became silent and the atmosphere heavy with expectation. "Those same young men," I said "who were called upon to sacrifice so much in the name of freedom then returned to be locked out of the institutions and citadels of privilege that they had ostensibly been fighting to preserve." (305)

Puller recognizes the exclusivity of the dominant class, the same class to which he had been born. He markets himself as a defender of the working class people, the class who had done most of the dying on the distant battlefields of Vietnam.[105] His status as an amputee and as a veteran of an unpopular war allowed Puller to empathize with the impoverished and uneducated populations of American voters from his district. While addressing African-American voters, he declares, "I knew what it meant to be a member of a minority and to be judged on the basis of personal appearance rather than intrinsic worth" (305). Puller argues that he better represents the needs of the people of his district, yet Trible seduces the voters with his rhetoric of patriotism and appeal to the fear of Communism. Puller laments, "[i]ronically, I who had been raised in the Marine Corps and had fought a war and seen firsthand the death and destruction that cheap rhetoric can engender, was made to appear less patriotic than my opponent who could fire up the most zealous flag-wavers, without ever having worn a uniform or heard a shot fired in anger" (312).

During Puller's political campaign, Puller finds a momentary affirmation in the reasons he served in the war, a moment that becomes the catalyst for his philanthropic legacy later in life. During a stop on the campaign trail, Puller visits a tailoring factory, and an episode "moved [him] almost to tears" (317). When he enters the building he observes, "row after row of sewing machines, each of which appeared operated by a Vietnamese woman" (317). Puller appears to experience a flashback, not a violent one, but rather a nostalgic one. He claims, "[w]hen they saw me, all work suddenly stopped,

[105]For an in-depth study of the socioeconomic class in the Vietnam War, a war fought by an eighty percent majority of working class Americans, see the following: Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993), 6.

and the familiar high-pitched cadence of Vietnamese women . . . replaced the sound of sewing machines and carried me back to my time in Vietnam" (317). The Vietnamese war-refugees greet Puller with "weeping faces" (317). He writes, "[t]hey wanted me to know how much my sacrifice meant to them and how it would always be remembered" (317). The survivors of the war reaffirm the value of Puller's service and render him speechless. He admits, "I had trouble speaking. . . . For once I felt uplifted rather than degraded by the reactions of strangers to my service in Vietnam" (317). Although none of the refugees could vote, Puller experiences a moral victory which would contribute to his philanthropic motivations before his death in 1994. He says, "the experience, far more enriching than a mere campaign event, helped me focus on why I was trying to become a congressman and kept my spirits buoyed for days" (317).

Puller describes a resurgence of motivation for political reform and the need to "give meaning to [his] being spared on the battlefield in Vietnam" (318). During his campaign, he receives a letter and a donation from a doctor who had treated his wounds in Vietnam. The doctor had been traumatized by his experience in Vietnam. For a year, the man had treated wounded soldiers and had been struggling with his memories of the casualties. The letter reads:

> Never . . . had I seen more severe traumatic injuries in a patient who lived, and I wondered . . . if I was doing the right thing by allowing you to live. . . . Your survival had seemed to me a miracle of dubious value which severely tested the moral imperative of my Hippocratic oath. . . . Your running for House of Representatives ten years after our meeting in Vietnam reaffirmed the worth of my service there and is a source of great personal satisfaction to me. (323)

The letter's endorsement of Puller's political campaign seems both a blessing and a curse. Puller, "buoyed by the realization that the doctor had had his Vietnam service validated by [his] current effort," feels "saddened" as he recognizes the likelihood of his political defeat. The sense that his efforts had inspired so many other veterans creates pressure and causes stress later in Lew's life, a pressure to achieve unattainable goals. This burden would return to trouble him after his re-injury and arguably become a contributing cause of his suicide. The election was a "rout" (326). Trible defeated Puller in a landslide. The loss sends Puller into a psychological downward spiral of depression, alcoholism, and attempted suicide. At the end of Chapter XII after the election, Puller's ideological quest narrative descends into psychological chaos.

Puller creates another artificial resolution in Chapter IX. The chapter is less than two pages long and a curious organizational technique, but if we read the chapter as a transition from his defeat, the reason becomes clear in light of this study. The short section discusses his state of mind the next morning, the hangover after election night during which his wife left him "alone with [his] misery and [his] scotch bottle" (328), an ominous foreshadowing of the next period of his life. He writes, "[u]nhappily I did not have a clue to what was next, other than to lick my wounds for a while and get reacquainted with my family" (328). One of the characteristics of post-traumatic stress disorder involves questioning the future, which we can see in his comment. However, Puller also suggests that the defeat would provide that opportunity for healing to take place in his family, a time to become reacquainted with his wife, and most significantly his children, whom he had "neglected" during his political campaign (311). He writes, "I could begin job hunting and we could try to restore some stability to our lives" (329). The

next chapter, ironically, dissolves into chaos and damages his relationships with his wife and children, perhaps permanently. The brief chapter represents a clear example of the author's attempts to insert a moment of resolution after the defeat. Closer examination of the following chapter, however, reveals dormant problems that will erupt shortly thereafter.

CHAPTER V

THE PSCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA NARRATIVE

During Chapter X, Puller undergoes a gauntlet of depression, alcoholism, and psychological disturbances. The cycles of recovery and relapse intensify in the final chapter until Puller finally reaches the nadir of his post-war life when he attempts suicide and nearly destroys his marriage and relationship with his children. Puller's psychological chaos has devastating consequences on his social life and distinguishing the social from the psychological narrative becomes nearly impossible. In many ways the next episodes are the psychosocial, but focusing on the nadir reveals that his readjustment problems remain inherently psychological because psychological trauma was the source of his inability to function socially. Before Puller continues with his social quest narrative, he must confront his repressed war-trauma and overcome his depression and alcoholism. Although Puller experiences many episodes of psychological distress, recovery, and relapse, the following section of this essay focuses on the most critical points of this final chapter to demonstrate the complexity of psychological trauma and its effect on his reintegration.

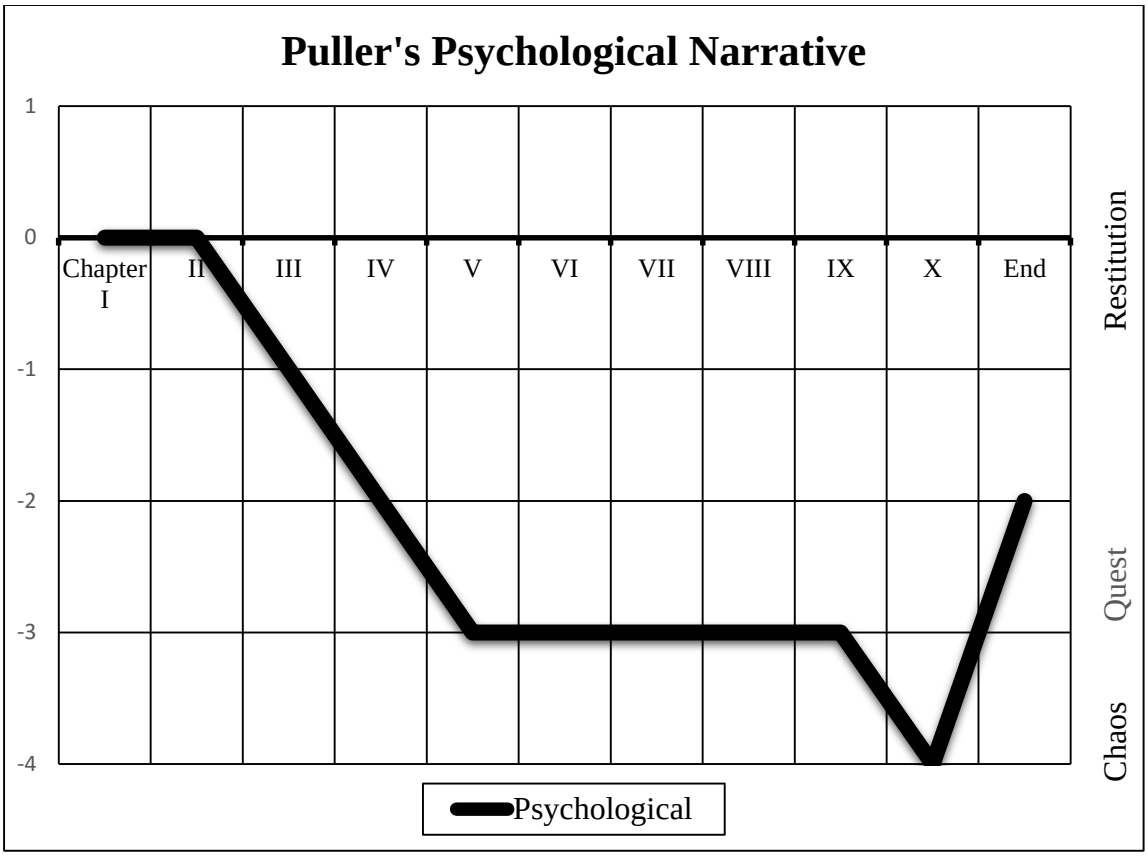

Figure 4: Figure illustrating the intensity of psychological distress (0=none; -1=mild; -2=moderate; -3=severe; -4=extreme)[106]

Survivor's guilt appears as the first of several effects of combat that Puller experiences. Puller's political defeat devastates him and leads to his psychological downfall. It recalls the distress of his Vietnam experience. Puller writes, "Toddy recognized that I was going through a grieving process in many ways similar to that which we experienced when I returned from Vietnam" (330). Puller had been subjected to overwhelming guilt since even before he had been wounded in Vietnam. Puller had

[106] The psychological distress scale in Figure 4 is modified from the Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS-1), which uses a Likert Scale developed from the DSM-III. The CAPS is a standardized interview used to assess PTSD. Based on the interview questions, I have analyzed the narrative to identify indicators of psychological distress. See the following: David Blake Dudley, et al., "The Development of a Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8, no. 1 (1995): 75-70. DOI: 10.1002/jts.2490080106.

been repressing his memories and the inherent psychological casualties of war. One of his men, Barton, experienced a psychological breakdown in the field (150). Puller's lack of experience led to negligence. Before the following episode, Barton had saved Puller's life, but Barton struggled to cope with his trauma on the battlefield. The event so "unnerved him that he had lost his usefulness as a marine" (149). Puller misinterprets the signs of psychological illness and combat fatigue, and mistakes his symptoms for cowardice and "sandbagging act[s]", or attempts "to get reassigned out of the bush" (149). Despite his symptoms, Puller orders Barton to pull himself up by the bootstraps and continue the mission. During the night, Barton's symptoms worsen and threaten the safety of others.[107] Puller writes, "[t]he men were ready to kill him for endangering their lives" (150). Puller reenacts the events of the night and the next morning:

> I had been holding Barton in my arms for much of the morning, and as the chopper set down, he seemed to stiffen in my arms and then relax. He had smiled up at me when I told him that his time in the bush was over. I wiped the saliva from his face in a last-minute gesture as we piled his body into the chopper. As it lifted off, I was overcome with relief and the platoon was elated to be done with a man who had almost doomed us. I did not know until we got back to Camp 413 later that night that George Barton had died in my arms. Until the very end I thought that he was faking a medical condition to get out of the bush, and I

[107]Barton appears to have been experiencing symptoms, all too common during combat in the Pacific Theatre of WWII, described by contemporaneous doctors as "Combat Fatigue," and his comrades react similarly to the Marines in the Pacific War. Marines in the Pacific theatre referred to this condition as being Asiatic. E.B. Sledge's memoir illustrates the devastating consequences of this problem in battle: "Our comrade's tragically tortured mind had slipped over the brink. Someone ordered, 'Hit him with a shovel', a sudden thud announced the command had been obeyed. The next morning I discovered the man was dead. I never saw such agonized faces as those who did what any of us would have had to do." Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed* (Ballantine Books, 1981), 101-02.

Today, experts apply the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to describe this problem. Historian Ronald Spector illustrates, "Hollow eyed, exhausted men plodded to medical stations, where doctors puzzled over them and labeled them temporarily mentally disturbed." Ronald H. Spector. *The Eagle Against the Sun: The American War With Japan.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 236.

> shall carry to my grave the guilt from the way I misread
> him in his last hours. (150-151)

The lines reveal a confession of guilt and acceptance of responsibility for the death of a man under his leadership, a soldier who had saved Puller's life. Puller considers the offence unpardonable, although at the time he could not have possibly understood the psychological stress that Barton had been experiencing.[108] Puller's account closely resembles what psychologist Edward Kubany calls "I Should Have Known Better Guilt." Kubany explains the term and its causes: "With the aid of hindsight (i.e., knowing how events unfolded in reality), many veterans believe today that somehow they should have been able to anticipate negative outcomes to their wartime actions and, therefore, behaved differently. Many veterans hold themselves personally responsible and condemn themselves because of the faulty assumption that they could have, and therefore should have, known better."[109] Puller never finds resolution for the way he responded to the traumas of others as a commanding officer. The memories and guilt regenerate his own traumas, which resurface throughout his narrative. Puller also exhibits characteristics of moral injury along with survivor's guilt and PTSD.[110] Moral injury can result from "witnessing a friend get killed and feeling survivor's guilt," write Rita Brock and

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[109] Edward S. Kubany, "A Cognitive Model of Guilt Typology in Combat-Related PTSD," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7 no. 1 (1994): 6.

[110] See, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon, 2012).

Although each contribute to the other psychological consequences of war, they are exclusive, but often difficult to distinguish. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini note "[r]ecently Veteran's Affairs clinicians have begun to conceptualize moral injury as separate from PTSD and as a hidden wound of war." Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, xv.

Gabriella Lettini in *Soul Repair,* a recent study of moral injury in veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[111] These authors describe characteristics of moral injury which appear similar to Puller's problems: "soldiers may judge themselves as worthless; they may decide no one can be trusted and isolate themselves from others; and they may abandon the values and beliefs that gave their lives meaning and guided their moral choices."[112] Although *Soul Repair* recognizes moral injury in the context of twenty-first century warfare, this form of trauma seems timeless and applicable to Puller's experience in Vietnam.

When Puller received his near-fatal wounding, it left not only physical wounds, but also psychological scars that remain at the end of the book. He relives his darkest and most shameful moments, perpetually. John Talbott argues that reenactment—that is, the telling and retelling of soldier's stories, or narrative reconstructions of experiences—are not only a common feature in war stories but are "perhaps the cruelest feature of the disorder."[113] Talbott explains, "Reenactments can also be insidious, ambushing combatants long after they have left the scene of battle."[114] Puller experiences a debilitating sense of guilt in the aftermath of his wounds. Guilt is identified as one of the "major symptom clusters that define PTSD" in Vietnam combat veterans.[115] Puller's admission of guilt closely resembles betrayal or abandonment guilt. Kubany describes

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[111] *Ibid.*

[112] Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair,* xv.

[113] John Talbott, "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 27, No. 3 (1997): 437. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20.

[114] Talbott, "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," 442.

[115] Kubany, "A Cognitive Model of Guilt," 3.

abandonment guilt as "characterized by feelings that one did not do enough for one's fellow soldiers in combat."[116] The circumstances of his injury manifest feelings of survivor's guilt. Puller admits,

> I felt guilty for years that I had abandoned them before our work was finished. I was to feel even worse that I was glad to be leaving them and that, in my mind, I had spent my last healthy moments in Vietnam running from the enemy. I came to feel that I had failed to prove myself worthy of my father's name, and broken in spirit as well as body, I was going to have to run a different gauntlet. (158)

He describes his post-war experiences as a "gauntlet," in which the effects of trauma batter his body and mind. Puller feels the irreconcilable guilt from what he considers his act of cowardice, which results from his comparing himself to his father's legacy. He believes himself unworthy of the Puller name, which leads to a crisis of identity. Puller admits that he "did not feel that [he] had earned a Silver Star" (159). These reflections reveal Puller's struggles with gender constructions of masculinity and the ways these constructions demand that men act with honor and courage in the face of death.

Puller's avoidance and the unresolved psychological trauma led to alcoholism and addiction as he attempted to suppress his guilt.[117] Medical Doctor Lial Kofoed, et al., state that between 60-80% of Vietnam veterans who seek treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) also "exhibit concurrent diagnoses of drug or alcohol abuse or dependence."[118] Alcohol use, however, does not alleviate the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder; it contributes to the problems and inhibits the ability to maintain social

[116]Kubany, "A Cognitive Model of Guilt," 4.

[118] Lial Kofoed, M.D., et al., "Alcoholism and Drug Abuse in Patients with PTSD," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 64, no.2 (1993), 151.

relationships.[119] Puller's autobiography reveals characteristics indicative of undiagnosed co-morbid post-traumatic stress disorder. Comorbity involves the tendency of an individual who suffers from one disorder to be diagnosed with another, *i.e.*one disorder causes or contributes to another. Gruden, *et al*., describe PTSD as "the failure to find an emotional solution to the closeness of death."[120] (607). As Gruden observes, "PTSD is frequently associated with alcoholism as type of *self-healing*" and "[n]on-treated PTSD frequently leads to the development of alcoholism."[121] In Puller's narrative, he describes anxieties, PTSD, depression, and alcoholism, all of which complicate one another. Puller's undiagnosed PTSD contributes to his alcoholism, and his drinking worsens his symptoms of PTSD. The two factors are recursively destroying his health and his relationships.

In the aftermath of Puller's political defeat, he abuses alcohol to the point at which it risks all of the progress he had made toward reintegration and a successful career. He writes, "I slept late each morning, often drank my lunch . . . and ended my days brooding alone in darkness . . . with a half-empty scotch bottle" (330). Puller becomes a belligerent drunk. He feels "worthless" and drinks himself to sleep most

[119] Puller grew up in a culture of alcoholism, and in the Marine Corps, drinking is a cultural norm. His alcoholism inhibits his abilities to function in social situations and damages his social relationships. While still recovering from his physical injuries, Puller begins to drink heavily to cope with the physical pain and to repress the emotional pain of his trauma. At his twin-sister's wedding, for example, he grows anxious in the company of family. He feels "completely alienated from the family friends," who he had known since childhood. As they are "crowding in on" him, he feels ready "to explode" (196). He writes, "[a]s I continued to drink . . . I had learned that I was not prepared to deal with social circumstances" (196). Unable to function, he leaves his sister's wedding with "tears streaming down my cheeks, dead drunk, and in much need of spiritual repair" (197).

[120] V. Gruden, et al., "PTSD and Alcohol," *Coll. Antropol*. 23 (1999), 607. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10646235

[121] *Ibid.,* 608.

nights. He begins "to isolate" himself and "avoid social occasions and "seize on any pretext to maintain [his] self-imposed exile" (332). His alcoholism affects the trajectory of his psychological narrative as his quality of life plummets. Gruben, *et al*., also claim, "[a]lcoholism is particularly unfavorably reflected on the family of a PTSD patient, whose quality of life is already poor due to the basic disease."[122] Puller writes, "I became *more obsessed* with the Vietnam War, and I dwelt endlessly on the unfair treatment and lack of respect that my fellow veterans and I received from the media, from society, and from our government" (332). He realizes, "I was going to have to give up [his] crutch before [his] children realize that their father was becoming a lush," but admits, "I always found some excuse to continue drinking" (332).

His alcoholism delayed the post-war readjustment process for over a decade. He writes, "[f]or years I had used alcohol to numb the pain of my Vietnam experience and the loss of my legs, and now in what I regarded as cruel irony, alcohol was failing to bring the relief of oblivion" (333). His tolerance led to drinking even more excessively and resulted in debilitating depression. He confesses, "[a]fter six months on the job, I could tell I was becoming powerless over my ability to control my drinking, and though terrified about my situation in a way I had not felt since Vietnam, I dared not reveal my dark secret to anyone" (333). He hides his drinking from his wife, as best as possible, but "Toddy sensed that something was severely wrong" (333).

The problems of psychological trauma threaten his life. Puller laments, "too isolated to ask for help, I decided that I was a failure as a lawyer, a husband, and a father,

[122] Gruden, et al., "PTSD and Alcohol," 608.

and I began contemplating suicide" (334). Puller reconstructs a second attempted suicide scene:

> I wrote Toddy a brief note telling her that I loved her and the children and that what I was about to do was not her fault. . . . I had one more drink, went to the car, and tightly closed the garage and kitchen doors. I put the key in the ignition. For what seemed like an eternity I sat behind the wheel with my hand on the ignition key and tears streaming down my face and thought about never seeing my family again. Unable to turn the key and suddenly feeling the effects of so much vodka, I decided to put my head down on the seat for a few minutes before getting on with my plan. When I came to several hours later, Toddy was standing over me, screaming and slapping my face, and all I could think was that my suicide gesture, like my life, had been a failure." (334)

Readers can identify the chaos narrative reemerging in this passage because Puller constructs the suicide attempt with clichés. The clichés attempt to penetrate the incommunicability of chaos. He summarizes the content of the note with a trite expression: it's "not [your] fault." His attempt becomes an expression of his helplessness. Puller's survival reaffirms his feelings of personal failure and recalls his sense of helplessness—just as he had felt after the first suicide attempt in the hospital. Puller is admitted to a psychiatric ward and "diagnosed as clinically depressed" (334) Once again, Puller loses agency, as "strangers plotted the course of [his] future" (334). He feels "humiliated and shamed to have so lost control" of his own life (334). Puller begins to recover gradually as he sobers. Without the alcohol in his system, he slowly becomes less depressed, but as with the holocaust survivors in Lawrence Langer's interviews, it gets much worse before it gets better.

The news of the "cathartic quest" to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides a moment of relief and glimpse of hope (335). Puller recognized that he needed

resolution from his Vietnam experience before any healing could occur. He recollects the therapy sessions, "I brought up the Vietnam War; but that topic, too, did not provoke any response from Dr. Kearney, and I decided that there was no point in pursuing it with him since he, like most young men, had never served" (335).[123] Unable to relate to the civilian world, Puller represses his trauma further. This act self-martyrdom, not seeking for help, results from growing up in a time when psychological illness was woefully misunderstood and being indoctrinated into the culture of masculinity in the Marine Corps that demands sacrifice. "[T]he Fortress trains its sons to suffer in silence, stoically, sharing their ghosts with no one," Wertsch claims.[124]

After having made a little progress in his recovery from alcoholism, his psychiatrist fails him. Puller discusses an upcoming wedding celebration with his psychiatrist and asks "whether [he] should break his abstinence," and the doctor "shock[s him] by saying" that since he had worked so hard at therapy, he "deserved the reward of being able to drink" (336). Puller's psychiatrist appears guilty of negligence and seems partly to blame for Puller's relapse. In the incapable hands of inexperienced doctors, Puller falls back into this cycle and "return[s] to the point of excess" (337). He writes,

> Over the course of the next fall and winter I drank myself into near oblivion almost every night . . . . I was becoming moody and withdrawn. I would awaken in the morning, shaky from overindulgence and badly in need of a drink. Once again my main goal on rising was to make it to the

[123] Gruven, et al., write that "A therapist's personality is an important factor with PTSD, particularly with patients who are refractory to psychotherapy. Individual approach to each patient depends on the structure of his/her personality. An experienced therapist, therefore, has a broad inventory of therapeutic approaches. A therapist's personal experience of a traumatic event will be helpful in his empathetic leading of the patient." *Ibid.*
Since Puller felt ostracized by society, Puller became hesitant to further the counseling sessions. The therapist's hesitation in allowing Puller to discuss his Vietnam War experience, likely, led to regression.

[124] Wertsch, *Military* Brats, 184.

> end of the day so I could resume my drinking. Ashamed of myself, I walked out on my friends and family, and alone and isolated, I became increasingly bitter at the injustice I thought life had dealt me. (337)

Puller had completely relapsed into a routine of dependence, depression, and despair. His problems returned, and this time, it forces away those who love Puller the most.

Puller's self-destructive coping mechanisms severely damage his relationship with his children, and this period of his life, as the author describes it, may have been the cause of the lasting problems in his relationship with Lewpy. Puller describes himself as helpless man, a selfish husband, and a dysfunctional father:

> Toddy did her best to maintain appearances and keep the family and our relationship going, but I was far too self-absorbed to grasp the heroism involved in her effort. When lovemaking became an impossibility during the nighttime, she accommodated me by accepting my advances after I had awakened in the morning, but there was no joy and no tenderness in my desperate attempts to prove myself still functional. On those rare occasions when my head was clear enough for self-reflection, my conscience reminded me that Lewis and Maggie were getting old enough to realize what was wrong with their father, but while I did not want them to remember me as a hopeless drunk, I was powerless to alter my self-destructive course. (338)

Puller begins to "drink just to feel normal" (339). He starts drinking on the job to make it through the day, and he drinks in the middle of night to make it until morning. Puller becomes "engaged in a life-or-death struggle" with his addiction and the unresolved experiences of the Vietnam War (339). John Talbott's study remains one of the very few which examine Lew Puller's autobiography. Talbott uses *Fortunate Son* as evidence that alcoholism is a symptom of reenactment. He argues, "[t]he urge to drink is a common impulse of soldiers haunted by reenactments. Take the case of Puller, whose wounding . . . became his life." Talbott suggests that Puller's reoccurring nightmares were

reenactments of the trauma and "[p]artly to assuage the terror, Puller began hitting the bottle, and before long was deep into alcoholism."[125] Although Puller's addiction, as this essay shows, results from a complexity of issues and variety of sources—not just the trauma of flashbacks and reenactments—including depression, pain, and other social factors (*e.g.* the culture of alcohol in the military)—Talbott correctly asserts that "[n]o amount of self-medicating can drop the curtain on reenactments. The worst cases are chronic."[126] Puller's case seems hopeless. He writes, "At four o'clock in the morning, with the house silent and the almost totally dark, I was now in a world of my own, and I wondered if I would ever rejoin the world of the living" (343). At the nadir of his psychological traumatic narrative, the drinking asphyxiates his life and any chances he has of reintegrating.

The psychological problems further contribute to his marital difficulties. When his wife Toddy realizes the deadly extent of Puller's addiction, she reaches her breaking point in their relationship. She rushes Puller to the emergency room, with his blood alcohol content (BAC) at deadly levels and then leaves him in his isolation to detox and face the realities of his condition. In his spiritual low, Puller realizes he "would never be able to drink again" and "that realization, signifying the end of a relationship that had sustained [him] for twenty years, triggered a sense of loss" that he feared he was unprepared to overcome (344). The threat of being alone seems to have spurred him toward rehabilitation and sobriety. Frank explains, "[h]is moment of deepest chaos would seem to be behind him. His story's narrative has become one of recovery yet he was, as

[125] Talbott, "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," 442.

[126] Talbott, "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," 442.

he put it, 'dead scared of living.'"[127] Puller, "[t]ruly terrified at the prospect of living," he admits, "I mourned" the loss of the alcohol-induced numbness, "with a grief as palpable as . . . had a loved one been taken from me" (344). He exhibits fear of reentry. Puller comes to recognize his "alcoholism as illness," and he believes that if he could control his illness through "abstinence," then he could "someday resume a normal life" (345). Puller embarks on a final quest: a ten-year road to recovery from alcoholism, moving forward toward reconciliation at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

[127] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 106.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYTH OF RECOVERY AND HEALING

The final sections of *Fortunate Son* reconstruct his recovery from alcoholism and his attempts to resolve his traumatic war experiences. Puller claims "I was being given a third chance at life" (349). During his stay at rehab, he endures a "sort of trial by fire," an episode which tests his psychological strength and begins his road to recovery through the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Before his release from his 30-day rehab program, Puller undergoes a process of criticism and personal catharsis, in which the staff and his fellow "comrades" bombard him with intensely personal questions and criticize his answers. Puller uses military jargon to describe the process. "The opening exchange," he writes, "set a favorable tone because each succeeding question or comment was either neutral or complimentary, and within five minutes it was over" (353). Puller realizes the extent of his physical injuries had prevented a full contact exchange and "blunted any potential slings and arrows" (353). The counselors criticized Puller with the same reservations that had "discouraged friends and family from criticizing [his] drinking" (353). Puller finally realizes that pity would not force the change he needed. The revelation appears a turning point for Puller. He recognizes the full extent of his injuries—that his physical injuries had contributed to his psychological illness and social

alienation. He was "sick, physically, mentally, and spiritually when [he] hit bottom and was made to confront [his] alcoholism" (357).

In the autobiography, Puller attempts to reconcile his personal experiences with the national trauma of the Vietnam War by situating his psychological recovery along with the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. The personal narrative becomes a part of a narrative of national healing, another American myth. Kalí Tal explains, "[t]he competing drives to resuscitate history and to generate myth are exemplified by the struggle over the Vietnam Memorial Wall—the result of a massive effort by veterans to memorialize themselves."[128] As Puller recovers from alcoholism, he fixates upon the building of the memorial wall. He writes, "I came to believe that its progress and my own progress were twin facets of a divine plan and not mere circumstance. The healing process that was at work within me, I felt, also inhabited the granite and concrete" of the wall (356). The Wall, Puller claims, embodies the healing process of a nation and a generation of soldiers, but his description excludes any reconciliation with his government. He writes,

> We had gone to war to do our country's bidding, to offer up our lives and limbs without thought of personal reward. But we had come home to indifference and rejection on the part of the government that demanded of us so much, and I thought it particularly fitting that it be now excluded from taking any credit for such a powerful symbol of the healing process. (358)

After so much language that describes helplessness, Puller has become accountable for his own healing process without support of the government. Upon the Wall's dedication, his resentments are reinforced and his sense of betrayal solidified. He believed that

[128] Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 61.

President Reagan, who had run for the presidency under a platform of national reconciliation and reinforcement of America's moral superiority in the world, failed the Vietnam generation and disrespected their service once more, adding insult to injury. "[T]he president and most of his administration had not seen fit to attend the dedication," Puller laments. Politicians and public figures suggested that the building of the memorial was a final reconciliation of a nation divided over the war. Historian Christian Appy argues "That was, in fact, the explicit purpose of the organizers." A group of veterans who were advocated the memorial wrote that the Wall, "'promote[s] the healing and reconciliation of the country" so the American people could "'separate the warrior from the war,'" which became a national cliché. "Not everyone bought it," Appy argues. "Some veterans viewed their belated hero status as empty symbolism, an inadequate substitute for more meaningful forms of support."[129] The problem with Puller's grounding his own recovery narrative in the building of the Wall is that no real healing had taken place, and the support was mostly symbolic and political rhetoric. Lew Puller desperately needed real, effective support, veterans' benefits, rehabilitation and recovery programs, a safety net that may have prevented the relapse before his suicide. The Wall masked the unresolved national trauma inflicted by the war, and Puller generated his own restitution myth around it.

As Puller progresses in his rehabilitation, he "tried to reintegrate [him]self with Toddy and the children" (354). He rebuilds his social life and returns to work. In the beginning of his recovery, he experiences a phenomenon referred to as the "pink cloud," a feeling of euphoria and exhilaration (355). Curiously, Puller describes the vaporization

[129] Christian Appy, *American Reckoning*, 240-41.

of his legs during the explosion as the "pink mist" (157). It is worthy of note that Puller's narrative has come full circle, from the first time he experienced a "pink mist." As Puller describes the elated state of sobriety, he returns to Vietnam. He writes, "in the midst of my euphoria, I began to turn again to my Vietnam experience and to the unresolved issues concerning it that my drinking had kept in abeyance. With a clear head for the first time in years, I felt robust and alive but also painfully compelled to come to terms with my past" (355).

Puller's language reflects the heroic narrative structure illustrated by Freytag's Pyramid as he enters a falling sequence. He writes, "[o]ver the next several months I came down from the pink cloud that had eased my transition into sobriety" (363). As he comes down, "[t]he descent" is "gradual" (362). He moves toward resolution, as he "learn[s] to deal with [his] long-unresolved feelings about Vietnam" (362). He comes to the realization that the source of his tension lies "internal rather than external" (362). Puller writes his resolution as a spiritual epiphany:

> I realized the Vietnam War had been over for ten years. If I were going to come to grips with it, I would have to change because events happening a decade earlier could not change. When I looked at it that way, it became easier for me to accept the fact that I had lived while so many of my comrades had died and even eventually take pride rather than feel guilty about having survived. I also came to see that while the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake and never should have been fought, my role in it had been honorable as circumstances would permit. I had not performed perhaps as well as my father might have; but I had done the best I could, and it was time to move on to new challenges." (362)

The author reconstructs the moment of resolution relying on trite language that resembles the utterances of Alcoholics Anonymous members when they recite a version of the

Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." In the single paragraph, Puller mentions many of the unresolved problems that resulted from the war which had nearly severed his relationships with his wife and children. The unresolved issues and psychological traumas had led to ten years of alcoholism, two suicide attempts, and social stigmatism. He had battled depression, survivor's guilt, and moral injury for nearly a decade. He had missed his opportunity to reconnect with his father. To claim he simply could not change the past appears a superficial cliché. Puller implies that traumatized veterans just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and move on, which seems counter-intuitive to the book's testimony to the lasting effects of war-injury. In reality, a few months of sobriety could not resolve the untreated illnesses which had plagued Puller's life. His participation in Alcoholics Anonymous facilitated recovery from addiction, but alcoholism was the result of his attempting to self-medicate his war traumas. At the source of all of his problems was the Vietnam War and its consequences to his body, mind, and social life. AA provided relief from the symptoms of his traumas, not the problem itself. Perhaps recognizing the fragility of his recovery, Puller leaves the audience with an impression of uncertainty. He quotes, twice more in the final chapter, Creedence Clearwater's Revival's lyrics, "went down to Virginia seekin' shelter from the storm."[130]

Puller's recovery from alcoholism and the process of memorialization of the Vietnam Veterans Wall resuscitate him back to the world of the living. Puller decided to write "an autobiography in which [he] would surrender the Vietnam War," suggesting

[130] Puller, *Fortunate* Son, 362, 369.

that his writing was therapeutic act (363). Puller's chaotic quest narrative transforms into testimony of suffering and unintentionally "turn[s] illness into moral responsibility."[131] In his recovery period, he can finally put to language the trauma he has suffered in silence. Arthur Franks calls this form of story-telling the chaotic self-story and explains that "[w]hen such a struggle can be told, then there is some distance from the chaos; some part of the teller has emerged."[132] Puller can finally put his trauma to words because his sobriety has allowed him the clarity to reflect upon his experience and gain some distance from the chaos narrative. Frank tells us, "[t]he person who has lived chaos can only be responsible to that experience retrospectively, when distance allows reflection."[133] However, Frank also notes, "[t]elling his story is the final discharge of his responsibility."[134] Puller's testimony, unexpectedly, inspires other veterans. After all, "[t]he journey is a process of learning that their own suffering touches and is touched by the suffering of others."[135] Puller's autobiography becomes a testimony to the ability of man to overcome extreme trauma through determination and endurance; however, as the final years of Puller's life demonstrate, trauma can resurface several times, and survivors need the support of loved ones as well as lifelong access to counseling and therapeutic services to recover from the experience of war.

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[131] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 137.

[132] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 104.

[133] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 108-09.

[134] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 163.

[135] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 178.

The final scenes of the autobiography depict Puller's participation in ceremonies and dedications of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in which he attempts to grieve collectively with the Vietnam generation. Puller reads names from the list of casualties at the Candlelight Vigil of Names at the National Cathedral. He recollects, "[t]he task proved difficult, but it gave me a sense of the cultural diversity that made up our heritage and once again brought home how tragically the melting pot of America had become a caldron [sic] of fire in Vietnam" (365). As he neared the end of the names of the dead, he included the names of his friends who died in Vietnam. The moment seems to provide a sense of closure from his war experience. Puller admits, however, that the memorialization was "Spartan and brief, almost as if we could go only so far with our collective grief and ultimately had to make our peace individually, alone, or at best with the help of our own personal gods" (367). Because the memorial was not accessible to wheelchairs during the dedication ceremonies, Puller could not "get close enough to feel its healing power" (367). Lew's disability and war-injuries remind him that he had been "forever set apart from the rest of humanity" (157). As far as his rehabilitation and grieving process had progressed, readers are reminded at the end of the book of the permanency of war-trauma. Puller attempts to build from the imagery of healing that the Wall represented to some politicians and veterans, but as this analysis reveals, very little healing actually took place.

Puller's relationship with the Marine Corps remains irrevocably interconnected and metaphoric of his relationship with his father. Puller depicts the ambivalence and the unresolved tensions in these relationships in a final scene in which he and his wife attend a Marine Corps reunion. As he walks into the room, he sees "half a dozen veterans lay

sprawled on the floor, drinking beer, sleeping, or in various states of relaxation" (368). Puller describes the room as "ominous," and marines as disorderly: "[t]here seemed to be no one in charge" (368). Puller reveals, however, that he feels at home in the chaos of the scene. He writes, "I was at last back among the men who had fought with me and protected me in the now-distant rice paddies and jungles of Vietnam, and I felt safe and at ease in their company" (369). Lew expresses ambivalence toward the Corps: "I wondered how, after a lifetime of contact with the Marine Corps, I could love and despise it with such equal ardor" (369). We are reminded of the duality in Lew's relationship with Chesty. He cannot reconcile his love for the man and his contempt for the legend. To reinforce the metaphor of the Corps as the father, Lew writes "[a]s we were leaving, Toddy, who was by now feeling comfortable with the group, turned to one of the marines and told him that I was Chesty Puller's son." The veteran responds, "'Yes, ma'am . . . and I'm John Wayne'" (369). Lew once more implies that he failed to live up to his father's name, and his father's legacy rivals war heroes that only Hollywood could produce. Lewis and Toddy leave the reunion and drive "south toward home, Virginia, and shelter from the storm" (369). Readers recognize the Credence Clearwater Revival lyrics as a reoccurring image and symbolic of the "repeated infliction" of trauma.[136] The uncertainty becomes apparent as the Puller family drives into the night and into the unknown future.

The closing lines of *Fortunate Son* reaffirm the bond of comradery with Vietnam veterans, "a kinship that surpassed time and place" (369). In Puller's resolution, he gains the ability to mourn not only his own losses, but also those of his brethren. Frank

[136] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

explains, "[h]uman illness when lived as a quest, always returns to mourning. The boon is gaining the ability to mourn not for oneself, but for others."[137] The Vietnam veterans share a bond, known only by those who have survived the hardships of war. The Wall represents the solidarity among soldiers—not the reconciliation of a divided generation. Puller writes,

> Seeing myself in its polished stone, [I] came to understand how inextricably linked the memorial and I were by the bloodshed of my brothers—I, an insignificant speck on the continuum of history; the memorial, panoramic in its sweep, eternal, dark, silence, embracing all who would pause before its outstretched arms, in the end, comforting, spiritual, rooted in the present, but, like me, looking both backward in sorrow and anger and forward in hope and exultation. (369-70).

We are left, however, with one final unresolved issue. The Wall adds only the names of veterans who died as a result of their physical wounds, not the mortal psychological and spiritual wounds. The Wall excludes the innumerable suicides, including Lewis B. Puller Jr.

[137] Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 136.

CONCLUSION:

THE LEGACY OF LEW PULLER AND THE AFTERMATH OF SUICIDE

My analysis has revealed the instability of Lew Puller's recovery and the limitations of his rehabilitation from alcohol. Because alcoholism was a symptom of the trauma not the cause, Puller's narrative of healing remains superficial as the traumas beneath the surface remained unhealed. Alcoholism affected his psychological trauma narrative intensely and damaged perhaps irrevocably his family relationships and social life, but sobriety did not resolve his problems. Furthermore, memorialization did not heal the ideological ruptures that he experienced in the aftermath of the Vietnam as the autobiography suggests. Puller hinges the resolution of his and other veterans' social problems on the building of the Wall, but memorialization as a healing process seems another construction that masks the underlying problems that remained. The Wall did not provide the actual support that war veterans still desperately need.

Puller remained sober for nearly a decade, but he battled chronic pain and unhealed wounds from Vietnam. When he fell and broke his hip, all at once the traumas resurfaced; the physical, the social, and the psychological chaos overwhelmed Lew's life. He succumbed to the pain of his injuries and addiction to opiates. His marriage deteriorated with the decline of his physical and psychological health. When his wife

Toddy left him, Puller had neither the strength nor the motivation to recover. After decades of enduring physical pain, depression, addiction, and endless cycles of recovery and relapse, Lew Puller turned a gun on himself, ending his life on May 11, 1994.[138] His wife stated: "To the list of names of victims of the Vietnam War, add the name of Lewis Puller. He suffered terrible wounds that never really healed."[139]

When Puller received the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for his autobiography, he became a cultural icon and symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. He continued to make use of his status philanthropically. The year before his death, Puller founded the Vietnam Children's Fund after he returned to Vietnam and decided that "the most appropriate monument to the past and greatest hope for the future would be schools for Vietnam's children."[140] Lew did not survive to see the ground-breaking ceremony of the first school in the Quang Tri Province; however, others have taken up the torch and helped to realize Puller's dreams.

Lew Puller's narrative is driven by his need to find a greater cause for his sacrifice; the writer recreated himself in the image of a role model to whom other traumatized veterans could aspire. He fashioned himself as a man who endures unimaginable circumstances and overcomes the hardships of war-injury through

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[138] *The New York Times*, 14 May 1994. http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/14/us/suicide-of-a-veteran-amid-pain-and-fame.html

[139] *The New York Times*, 12 May 1994. http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/12/obituaries/lewis-puller-jr-vietnam-hero-and-biographer-is-dead-at-48.html

[140] Vietnam Children's Fund.org. "Lew's Legacy." http://www.vietnamchildren.org/lews

perseverance, an extension of the values and code of honor among the Marines. Like his father, the image became a myth to which the mortal man could not compare. Post-text, Puller's life continued on a trajectory of self-fulfilling martyrdom. He wrote a narrative of healing that his body could not physically achieve, one so exceptional and so daunting that he preferred to die rather than relive. It is, perhaps, his own mythical persona that killed him, as much as the wounds of war.

The subtitle of *Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet* illustrates most poignantly the problem of the myth of resolution in autobiographical trauma narratives and the cultural misconceptions of war-injury. The subtitle denies the realities and complexities of trauma. Some wounds never heal; they forever scar the veterans, as the monument scars the Capitol. The Wall reflects cultural attitudes toward war and trauma. The memorial excludes names of veterans who commit suicide and, thus, denies the recognition of suicide as a casualty of war. Veterans battle with their war experiences long after the cease-fire, and their personal struggles are unfortunately neglected from the total costs of war.

Finally, any definitive conclusion to this study would be yet another artificial resolution and counter-intuitive to the purposes of this research. Although Lewis Puller's autobiography appears representative of many of the problems of Vietnam veterans, further analyses of resolutions of other literary works from different wars would benefit our understanding of trauma. Recommendations for further research involve the study of trauma in a variety of texts in different genres including films and narratives from multicultural sources that depict non-Western cultural experiences. Given the limitations of published autobiographies, *i.e.* the majority are written by educated white males, oral

history interviews with people of color and women would be necessary and exceptional to the understanding of war and its effects on the post-lives of trauma victims. The scope of research should expand beyond modern warfare to compare narratives from past centuries to determine if the problems of resolution are universal to the experience of war trauma. Recognizing the permanency of war-injury will unveil the cultural hero mythology of war and aid the reintegration and rehabilitation process of veterans. We confront the realities of modern war through the narratives of veterans. "Those forever youthful ghosts memorialized in stone" speak to us from beyond the grave, and we have a civic duty to listen (371).

When listening closely to war stories, we recognize why so many rely on clichés, tropes, metaphors, and rehearsals of the same vague description: *war is hell.* War stories are chaos narratives of collective trauma and mass violence—and chaos narratives are beyond language. Veteran reintegration and recovery narratives are cultural quest narratives rooted in the instability of chaos. A clear and consistent pattern emerges in Puller's narrative: a perpetual process of a quest of readjustment disrupted by the reoccurrences of trauma and the return to chaos narrative. The trauma of war threatens the upward trajectory of the veteran reintegration narratives. The physical, the social, the ideological, and the psychological narratives remain at risk of collapse into chaos after the end of Lew Puller's autobiography. Resolutions are social constructions that obscure the experiences and distort the realities of war trauma. However, identifying the pattern of recovery and relapse, and acknowledging the repetition of trauma enables researchers to develop more effective reintegration programs for combat veterans and facilitate recovery and rehabilitation processes that prepare war survivors for the rehappenings of

trauma. In the context of this study, another Creedence Clearwater Revival song, “Have You Ever Seen the Rain,” seems particularly relevant to the pattern of trauma and the nature of chaos narratives: “There’s a calm before the storm, I know; It’s been comin’ for some time . . . ‘Til forever, on it goes. Through the circle, fast and slow, I know; It can’t stop, I wonder.”

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LEW PULLER’S *FORTUNATE SON* AND THE MYTH OF RESOLUTION

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